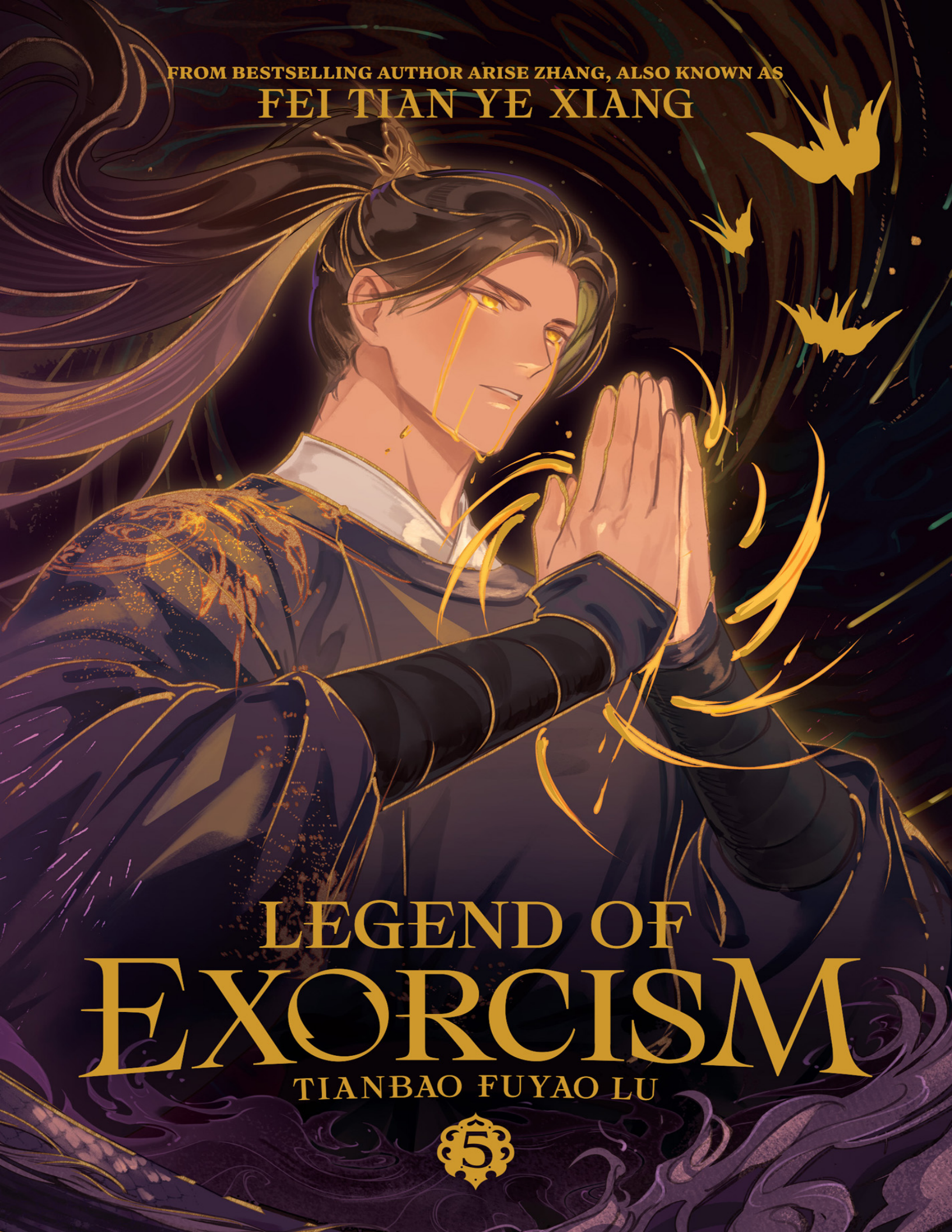
FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
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LEGEND OF
EXORCISM
TIANBAO FUYAO LU
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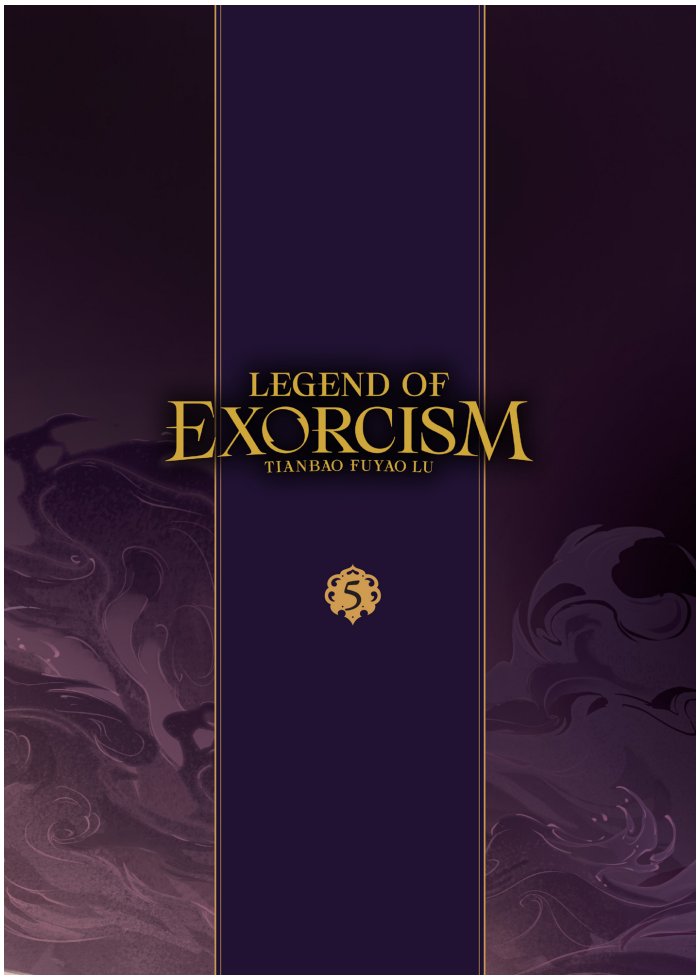
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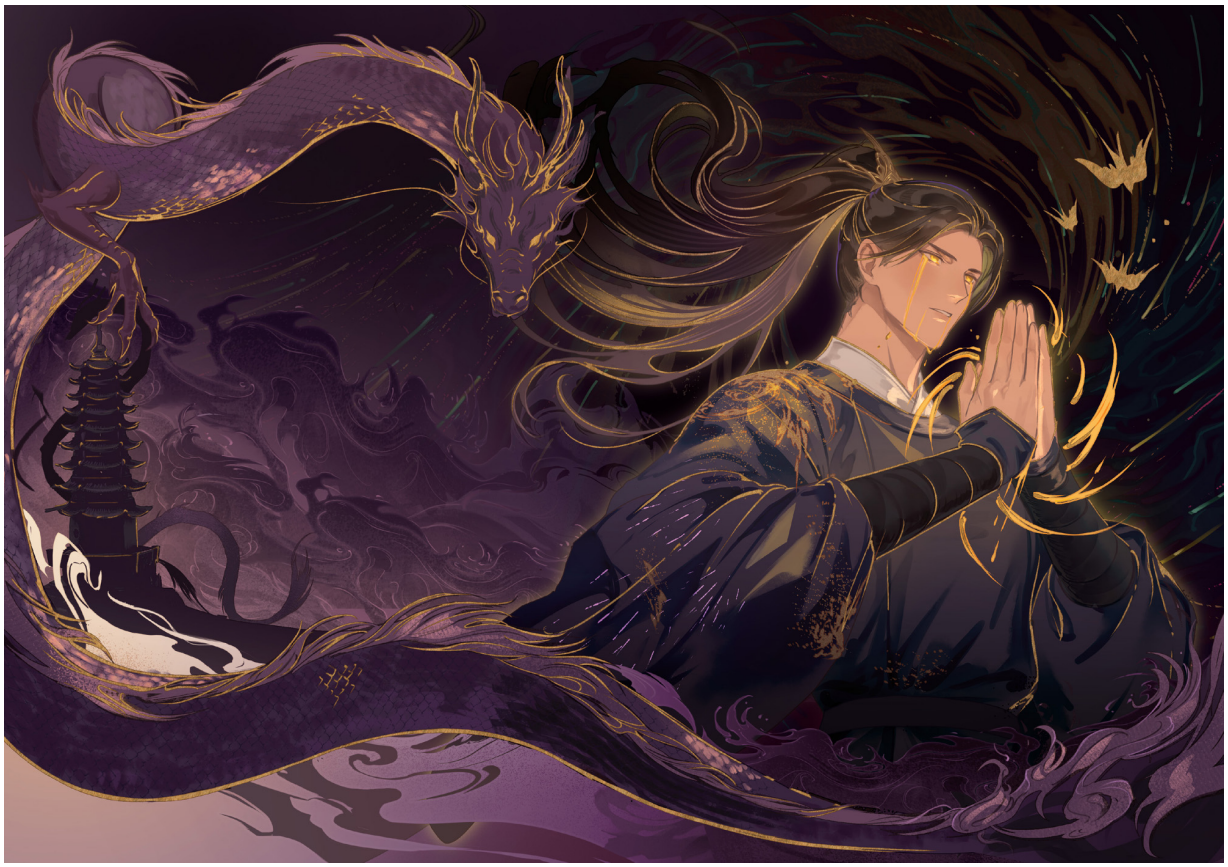

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LEGEND OF EXORCISM

TIANBAO FUYAO LU
天宝伏妖录

5

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Seven Seas

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Chapter 110:
Black Wolf Beneath the Moon

CHANG'AN WAS FESTOONED with lanterns and colored banners in celebration of Yang Yuhuan's birthday, four days hence. The palaces had prepared fireworks far in advance, which would be set off the night of the festivities. The gates of the city stood wide open, and the masses flooded in like the tide, filling the western capital with nearly a million people. The taverns and inns of the East and West Markets had long since grown overcrowded with a mix of Hu people from the Western Regions, Semu folk, and emissaries from various nations.

Inside the Anxi Barracks, Mergen stood before An Lushan, dressed in black and radiating malign energy. His eyes—once clear and bright—were dark and piercing; his thin lips seemed sharp as a blade, and his face had taken on a chilly cast. He stepped up to the table and flipped open a folded document to reveal a list of names.

"Your targets," An Lushan said with a warm smile.

The first name Mergen spotted was Hanguo Lan, followed by Geshu Han. Finally, written in stark strokes at the bottom, were the words *Censor-in-Chief Feng Changqing.*

"I'm acquainted with all of them," Mergen responded. "Hanguo Lan is a resident merchant in Chang'an, a man from the Western Regions. Why kill him?"

A black-clad warrior standing beside An Lushan answered for him. "He is also the unofficial leader of the city's black market. Lord Mara needs to take this opportunity to silence him."

Mergen shot An Lushan a dubious look but asked no further questions.

An Lushan picked up a goblet and took an absent sip of the deep red wine inside. "How do you know Hanguo Lan?"

“Met him when Li Jinglong sent us to buy oblivion pollen,” Mergen answered. “I’ll do it tonight.”

“Good,” An Lushan said. “After you deal with him, Wan Bao will take on his appearance. The two of you will move together on the noble consort’s birthday.”

The black-clad warrior—Wan Bao—gave Mergen a nod.

“Your second target is Geshu Han,” another man, also wearing black, told Mergen. “Killing him should be simple. He arrived in the capital a few days ago, and his army is encamped outside the city.”

“If you kill him, his army will rebel,” Mergen said.

“Naturally, Wan Feng will take his place.” An Lushan chuckled. “Hanguo Lan is greedy, and Geshu Han is quick-tempered. As long as we play up their basest attributes, we can replace them without issue.”

Mergen nodded. “What about Feng Changqing?”

“There’s no need to kill Feng Changqing. Merely poison him; I want to see how Li Jinglong reacts.”

“Kong Hongjun is well-versed in medicine and can cure all sorts of poisons,” Mergen said. “It would be best to cast a spiritual technique on Feng Changqing. Once Li Jinglong sees that his cousin has been poisoned, he will surely seek Kong Hongjun’s help. Use that chance to attack the seal inside Kong Hongjun, and you’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

Silence descended over the hall. An Lushan said slowly, “Excellent. I expected no less from a man whose cunning is equal to Li Jinglong’s. We’ll do as you suggest. You have seven days to take care of these three. Now, go.”

“What about the other members of the Department of Exorcism?” Mergen asked. “Unexpected complications may arise if they’re not eliminated.”

“Feng Changqing’s poisoning will draw the Department of Exorcism out,” An Lushan said. “As long as Wan Bao and Wan Feng successfully do their part, with you and me acting in concert, we can round them up in one fell swoop.”

With a final nod, Mergen bowed and withdrew.

As An Lushan watched Mergen's figure recede, Wan Bao asked quietly, "My lord agreed to his conditions?"

"All we need to do is take out one incompetent emperor," An Lushan said with a smile. "If I dispose of him, will this man not solve the rest of my problems for me?"

"Xie Yu will surely show himself," Wan Bao said. "He won't stand by and watch as Mergen goes around slaughtering your enemies."

"Leave him to me," An Lushan said coldly. "After the birthday celebration, he'll be under the watchful eyes of the public. He won't have the chance to turn the tide."

At dusk, having eaten and drunk his fill, Mergen slept briefly. Not until after nightfall did he rise and change into a set of black, formfitting combat robes. He settled down on the bed in contemplative silence to restring his bow, his long, slender fingers moving deftly through his task as he waited for Wan Bao to notify him that it was time to move out.

Inside Lanling Amber, business was booming. Nearly all of the tavern's seats were filled with foreign merchants.

Lu Xu was lying on the stone platform in the rear courtyard when his eyes flew open. Digging out a jade whistle, he brought it to his lips and blew a piercing trill. He filled his lungs and blew again, then again, until A-Tai hurried over.

"Stop, stop, I'm about to go deaf!"

Ashina Adarvan and Qiu Yongsi were just a few steps behind. "That whistle's got me breaking out in gooseflesh," Ashina Adarvan added.

Qiu Yongsi smiled. "That's exactly what we want, isn't it? For it to be audible half a city away. Everyone's out drinking right now, but it should be loud enough to—"

"An Lushan's ordered him to assassinate a merchant in Changle Ward," Lu Xu said, cutting him off. "Who could it be?"

Everyone tensed. With a frown, A-Tai said, "There are so many merchants in Changle Ward. How are we supposed to know which one?"

“Hanguo Lan?” Qiu Yongsi suggested.

“No way,” A-Tai murmured.

“The target’s house is carpeted with rugs from the Western Regions, and there’s a lion’s head hanging on the wall,” Lu Xu reported.

The three of them traded looks. “That’s Hanguo Lan all right,” Ashina Adarvan confirmed.

Qiu Yongsi turned to Lu Xu and explained, “He’s a resident merchant here in the city, from the Western Regions. He’s also our supplier of oblivion pollen. He’s well-informed, and he’s been known to dabble in the trade of spiritual devices…”

“The big wolf’s making his move tonight,” Lu Xu said, agitated. “We need to hurry and come up with a plan. Do we fight him?”

A-Tai turned and flicked open his fan. “Let’s go! Follow my lead.”

Mergen had just finished waxing his bowstring when Wan Bao’s menacing voice sounded from outside. “Time to go.”

Slinging his quiver over his back, Mergen fastened a leather strap around his thigh, to which he attached a poisoned dagger inset with a wolf’s fang.

“You need poison to kill an ordinary human?” Wan Bao asked.

“I prefer to be prepared.” With a great leap, Mergen caught the overhanging edge of the eave and flipped onto the roof.

The night was overcast, and his surroundings were dark as pitch. The sound of men cheering for blood sport echoed from a distant hall—evidently, An Lushan was once again gambling on human lives with the officers under his command.

Wan Bao transformed into a buzzing swarm of venomous insects and soared upward, following Mergen. Mergen shifted into a jet-black wolf as tall as a grown man and took off soundlessly across the rooftops, raising a gust of wind in his wake.

“Why is An Lushan sending *me*?” Mergen asked.

“You’ve met all three men,” the swarm answered in a faint hum. “They won’t suspect you.”

The black wolf lowered his head slightly. “What does suspicion matter when they’ll be dead?”

“Li Jinglong is a cautious man. Any clues we leave behind may become weapons in his hands,” the swarm answered. “This is also an opportunity to prove your loyalty to Lord Mara.”

When it came to murder, an acquaintance would always have a better chance of success than a stranger. If nothing else, the victim wouldn’t raise the alarm in the moments before death, needlessly adding to their risk of discovery. Mergen was also familiar with Chang’an, which saved the gu ape from having to track down their targets in the sprawling city.

Hanguo Lan was an ordinary man, but he was a longtime dealer of spiritual devices; one could only guess what magical defenses he had set up around his home. Perhaps this also explained how Hanguo Lan had held onto his position as a resident merchant in Chang’an for so long. Merchants feared death and were naturally cautious—herein lay the challenge in killing this target.

Geshu Han was a different story. When it came to killing him, the challenge lay in the fact that the military governor of Liang Prefecture was wary of An Lushan. He would never agree to meet with one of his envoys alone. Mergen, on the other hand, would be met with far less suspicion. As for Feng Changqing, he had likely been added to the list of targets on a whim. By attacking his cousin, Mergen would ignite an irreconcilable blood feud with Li Jinglong.

Mergen scoffed. “There’s no need to test me like this.”

“We’re shorthanded—*that* I can tell you,” the swarm murmured in response.

The black wolf’s ear twitched as he padded to a stop on the city roofs and cast his eyes over the brightly lit Changle Ward below. Although there were still four days until the noble consort’s birthday, many establishments were already aglow with celebratory lanterns, and the singing, dancing, and feasting had begun.

“We’re early,” the black wolf said.

At the Windblown Camel's Bell in Changle Ward, Hu women spun gracefully, myriad tiny bells sewn into their robes tinkling pleasantly as they performed the Sogdian Whirl to the sound of merchants' cheers. The vibrant scene here was a stark contrast to the brutal bloodletting in the Anxi Barracks. The dancers dispersed to the wine tables, where they nestled themselves into the arms of dozens of merchants, laughing as they urged their customers to lose their inhibitions and drink up.

The thickly bearded Hanguo Lan, the owner of the establishment, slumped drunkenly on a couch, his eyes narrowed in a squint. A servant girl stepped forward and murmured a question in his ear, then helped him to his feet, leading him away from the banquet and into the rear courtyard to rest.

Mergen was a flicker of shadow as he landed silently in the courtyard and ducked behind a tree, while the buzzing swarm streamed into the canopy of leaves. In his black clothes, Mergen was nearly indistinguishable from the night as he stared after the swaying Hanguo Lan.

Hanguo Lan pushed aside the servant girl and stepped into his room.

The girl turned to head back into the hall. As she passed the tree in the courtyard, she paused and briefly glanced around before continuing on her way, seeming to have noticed nothing amiss.

Mergen stepped out from behind the tree, his thin face sickly pale. One hand fiddling with a throwing knife, he stepped into the doorway and called in a low voice, "Hanguo-xiong?"

He was answered by the drone of snoring. The swarm of insects flew out of the tree and buzzed softly, "Go in and do it, now."

Mergen took a few steps back and snapped his fingers, shooting out a beam of dark energy. With a low hum, the area surrounding the house gleamed with a light that absorbed the attack—a spiritual barrier.

"You were right," Mergen said grimly. "He's protected by a spiritual device. He's the head of the black market and a trader in rare treasures; of course he'd carry something on him."

The swarm transformed back into Wan Bao, who glanced through the doorway—the room inside was richly furnished. He smiled dangerously, his eyes gleaming with greed.

A pearl ring on Hanguo Lan’s finger trembled insistently. He groggily opened his eyes. “Who’s there?”

Outside, Mergen struck the barrier with another blast of spiritual energy. “Hanguo-xiong, it’s me!”

“Prince Mergen?” Hanguo Lan was visibly drunk. He pressed a hand to his forehead and dismissed the barrier, allowing Mergen to enter.

Instantly, Mergen’s nailhead arrows shot from his quiver, maneuvering in midair to surround the house. Hanguo Lan splashed water on his face. “Tigra’s fiancée is in the city—”

The rest was subsumed by a muffled groan, followed by the crash of furnishings being knocked over—but even this disturbance was brief. Mergen quickly steadied the falling man. When Wan Bao strode into the room, he found Mergen with one hand pressed to Hanguo Lan’s brow, the other gripping a folding screen that had nearly toppled over.

Hanguo Lan’s eyes were wide open in death. A nailhead arrow had shot through the window and punctured his throat; its tip protruded from the back of his neck. He would have collapsed onto his face if not for Mergen’s hand on his forehead, holding him upright. Blood streamed from the wound in his neck to pool on the ground.

Wan Bao glanced first at the ring on Hanguo Lan’s finger, then up at Mergen, his eyes filled with shock. “You killed him so quickly?”

“I just helped him sober up,” Mergen said, dispassionate.

Wan Bao exploded into a swarm of humming insects once again, plunging into the puddle to drink the blood flowing from Hanguo Lan’s body like an army of ants eating its way through a sticky pool of brown sugar syrup. Mergen watched with no change in expression, indifferent to the stomach-turning sight.

As the swarm began to crawl its way upward to devour Hanguo Lan’s body, a servant girl called from outside: “Master, I’ve brought hot water for your bath.”

The swarm fell still. Mergen removed the ring from Hanguo Lan’s finger, and the insects rose upward, transforming into the spitting image of the man they were devouring. The fake Hanguo Lan took the ring from

Mergen with a murmur of acknowledgment, then pushed the door open and exited the room.

Mergen hauled the body up with one hand, stepped around the folding screen, and tossed it to the ground, concealing it from view.

Moments later, the fake Hanguo Lan returned. He stared at the body with a ravenous expression, as if he had yet to eat his fill. Mergen held up a hand. “I’m taking the body away. We were friends in life; I intend to at least leave him an intact corpse.”

Wan Bao didn’t protest. He tore his gaze from the corpse and studied the rest of the room with an avaricious smile. “There must be a secret passage in this house. Give me a moment to find his treasure trove.”

Mergen dragged Hanguo Lan’s body out to the courtyard and shifted into the great black wolf. Bowing his head, he took the corpse into his mouth, leapt onto a rooftop, and took off at a run. Only Wan Bao—disguised as Hanguo Lan—remained. He narrowed his eyes and began tapping on the walls and the floor an inch at a time, looking for a mechanism that might open a secret door.

Several rooms away, Lu Xu, A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, and Qiu Yongsi stood around a bearded, middle-aged man in lavish robes. The man’s arms were covered in bandages as he stared ashen-faced into a mirror, which showed a man with his own face searching for the mechanism that would unlock his private treasure trove.

The corner of Hanguo Lan’s mouth twitched as A-Tai patted him on the shoulder. “Looks like everyone knows about your stash, Hanguo-xiong.”

“This is the last dummy body I have,” Hanguo Lan murmured to himself. “Once it’s gone, I’ll have none left.”

Qiu Yongsi smiled. “You wouldn’t have been able to fool that gu ape if you hadn’t let so much blood in advance.”

“It nearly went wrong anyway,” Ashina Adarvan said. “If that gu ape decides to eat the corpse when he comes back—”

“He won’t,” Lu Xu responded. “I tampered with the big wolf’s dreams and gave him a new memory before he set out.”

“Oh? What memory?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

Lu Xu was quiet. After a moment, he said, “The big wolf dreamed he owes Hanguo-xiong a favor. That’s why he wants to keep the corpse intact.”

Everyone’s expressions underwent a subtle shift.

“Not just dreams—you can change people’s memories?” Hanguo Lan asked.

Qiu Yongsi made a sharp gesture at Lu Xu, who fell silent. A-Tai beamed and changed the subject. “Hanguo-xiong, our Lu Xu saved your life. How do you intend to repay him?”

Hanguo Lan’s thick beard twitched, and he seemed to transform as a broad smile split his face. “If you guys hadn’t sent Prince Mergen undercover, I wouldn’t have been in danger in the first place. Since the Department of Exorcism took such a bold risk with this scheme, it’s only right that you preserve my life, isn’t it?”

A-Tai smiled back. “I wouldn’t say that, Hanguo-xiong. If it wasn’t Mergen today, An Lushan would have sent someone else tomorrow. He won’t rest until you’re dead.”

Lu Xu was growing impatient listening to their back-and-forth. Distracted, he said, “You guys take your time haggling; I’m leaving.”

Qiu Yongsi began to protest, but Ashina Adarvan held up a hand—he’d follow Lu Xu.

“If Prince Mergen hadn’t come in person, how would I have been tricked?” Hanguo Lan countered. “Looks like I trusted you boys too much.”

“Hardly,” A-Tai said. “An Lushan is determined to kill you. Who knows what other tricks he has up his sleeve?”

“Ay, A-Tai, we take pleasure in helping others; there’s no need for any repayment, is there?” Qiu Yongsi said brightly, flicking open his fan. “Let’s go. We’ve got other work to do.”

Hanguo Lan’s expression shifted at once. “Wait! You guys set up this crazy scheme, and now you’re leaving me here all alone?”

A-Tai spread his hands in a shrug and made to follow Qiu Yongsi out. “There’s no business to be done. Why should we stick around?”

Realizing the gravity of his situation, Hanguo Lan hurried after them. “But when will you kill the heavenly demon?!”

“We’ll have to wait till the chief gets back, I guess,” Qiu Yongsi mused.

“When will that be?”

A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi blinked innocently and turned toward the exit.

Hanguo Lan had assumed there would be more to their plan—after all, A-Tai had gone to such lengths to track him down and convince him to use a dummy body to fool that gu ape. Now the pearl ring he’d used to prove his identity was gone too. Revealing himself at this point would only get him killed, either by the ape or by Mergen. What else could he do?

“Get back here!” Hanguo Lan grumbled, out of options. “What luck, to get embroiled in this mess. Go on then. What do you want?”

“Hanguo-xiong,” A-Tai said earnestly. “If the heavenly demon is not exorcised, Chang’an will never see peace. You won’t be safe either.”

“I get it already!” Hanguo Lan said, impatient. “Name your price!”

Qiu Yongsi waved the folding fan in his hand and traded a look with A-Tai, who motioned for him to speak. After a moment of thought, he said, “We’re seeking some information.”

Hanguo Lan gestured for Qiu Yongsi to go on.

“Why does the heavenly demon want to kill you?” Qiu Yongsi asked, thoughtful now. “Perhaps you’re aware of his weakness—or perhaps, of the existence of a spiritual device that can restrain him?”

This left Hanguo Lan stumped. “How am *I* supposed to know why the heavenly demon wants to kill me?” he fumed. “Do you think I would still be here if I did? I’d’ve been gone from the city ages ago!”

Qiu Yongsi snapped his fan shut and tapped it against his palm, struck by an idea. “Come, there’s something I want to show you.”

Hanguo Lan, still with one eye on the mirror, was about to fly into a rage at the sight of Wan Bao disabling the mechanism to unlock his private treasure trove. A-Tai gave him a push, turning him away from the sight. He and Qiu Yongsi sandwiched the merchant between them and frog-marched

him out, reminding him all the while that no matter how much money he had, he couldn’t spend it if he was dead. After much coaxing, they finally managed to escort him out of Changle Ward.

In the pitch-dark wilderness, a great black wolf dug swiftly into the earth, creating a deep pit measuring nearly ten square feet in no time at all.

Every so often he paused, twitching his ears or raising his head to sniff suspiciously at the air, alert to every rustle in the trees around him. When he finished digging, the black wolf threw Hanguo Lan’s body into the pit with a toss of his head.

Lu Xu stood atop a tree, watching the scene below. Silver rays of moonlight broke through the dark clouds, shimmering over the wolf’s gleaming fur as he pushed soil over the body. He circled the makeshift grave several times, then lowered his head to sniff at the earth once more. Seemingly satisfied, he turned to leave.

Ashina Adarvan had remained on the ground, hidden a few lengths away. The two humans watched as the black wolf loped into the distance. When he’d judged enough time had passed, Lu Xu jumped down from the tree, while Ashina Adarvan crouched to pick through the dirt.

“Can the spiritual device he used for this thing be restored?” Lu Xu asked.

“No idea; let’s take it back and find out,” Ashina Adarvan answered.

Evidently, he had no intention of missing the opportunity to recover the spiritual device Hanguo Lan had used to create his dummy body. He continued to paw through the dirt. Lu Xu left him to the endeavor. Straightening up, he gazed in the direction Mergen had gone and transformed into the white deer, rising into the air. Ashina Adarvan shouted after him, but he couldn’t fly; he had no choice but to leave Lu Xu to his own devices.

As night fell over Chang’an, the white deer emanated a pure radiance that spread over thousands of households. The sobs of children caught in nightmares faded, and the city, so restless on this summer evening, settled into true peace.

The black wolf bounded across the rooftops of Pingkang Ward, shook out his fur, and shifted back into human form. Mergen dropped to the ground and continued through an alleyway, where he stopped at a mutton soup stall for a late-night meal. With the hands he'd just used to kill a man, he broke apart a piece of flatbread and dropped the pieces into his soup; his fingers were still stained with blood.

Lu Xu leaned over the second-floor railing of the building across the street, watching quietly. Mergen seemed to be lost in thought as he carefully chewed each mouthful of food. Beneath the rich lamplight of Pingkang Ward, the clean lines of his profile seemed to pluck a string in Lu Xu's heart, setting it aflutter.

Mergen exuded a malevolent aura, like a cold god of death. The other customers in Pingkang Ward, as well as the servants coming to buy food for their masters and the servers wiping down the tables, avoided him without knowing why. Despite the bustle, he was left alone at his table. Lu Xu watched him intently for a while.

This stall had been the first restaurant Mergen had brought him to when they arrived in Chang'an months ago.

At the time, Mergen had told Lu Xu that he liked the food here very much. The establishment's signature dish was made by stewing a whole lamb until the meat was falling off the bone and the broth had turned a milky white. The addition of refreshing jingjie greens made the mutton soup mouthwateringly delicious, and the golden-brown flatbread that came with it was perfect for breaking into pieces and dipping in the broth. This was the only restaurant in Chang'an that made mutton soup with this particular herb, which the Shiwei people also used to season the meat of the whole lamb they cooked to celebrate their harvest festival.

For Mergen, it was the taste of home. Lu Xu had no such memory, so he had never understood Mergen's love for this delicacy.

But he could feel it now.

Closing his eyes, he tried to place himself in that lanky, wicked young man's memories. He saw Mergen sitting on the outermost fringes of the Shiwei royal family during their harvest festival. The grasslands were filled with merriment, but Mergen merely watched the crowd performing

the harvest dance as he pushed around a handful of pebbles on his table in boredom.

At the stall, a mangy little dog nosed its way over to Mergen's foot, sniffing for leftovers. Mergen stomped down, sending the poor creature scampering away in fright.

"You've become evil," Lu Xu murmured absently.

Mergen tossed a handful of copper coins on the table and rose to leave. He strode off down a dimly lit alleyway, and Lu Xu slipped down to the street, following him.

The alleyway was deathly silent. Clad in black, Mergen disappeared into the darkness. Lu Xu, moving cautiously so as not to make a sound, soon lost him. After a moment of thought, he concluded Mergen must have returned to the Anxi Barracks to report on his mission. He was about to turn around and take a shortcut to the barracks when a gust of wind whipped up behind him—

Lu Xu whirled to block the incoming attack, but Mergen was faster. He struck twice in quick succession, breaking through Lu Xu's guard. As Mergen's hand sliced toward his wrist, Lu Xu ducked and spun, slipping past him as they exchanged blows in midair.

Their collision raised a blast of wind. Lu Xu had always assumed he had the edge in terms of agility; he was stunned to find Mergen outmaneuvering him.

When did he get so fast?! Lu Xu thought in shock as Mergen flickered out of sight in a flurry of strikes before bearing down on him once more.

"I went easy on you before," Mergen said coldly, so close his mouth was nearly pressed to Lu Xu's ear. Lu Xu struck out with his foot, which Mergen easily deflected upward. Using the momentum to flip over, Lu Xu landed a kick on his shoulder; Mergen immediately hooked a hand around his ankle, locking him in place.

With a twist of the wrist, he slammed Lu Xu into the alley wall. Lu Xu nearly spat blood from the impact, his insides roiling. He cursed faintly and was about to make a run for it when Mergen slapped a hand against the wall beside his head and loomed over him, trapping him in place.

Mergen’s six nailhead arrows shot out of his quiver and trained themselves on Lu Xu.

“Give it back,” Mergen said, his voice low and dangerous. Standing in the shadows, he was like a bloodthirsty wolf with its hackles raised, ready to devour his prey at a moment’s notice.

There was a beat of silence. “Give what back?” Lu Xu asked.

“My arrow.”

Lu Xu studied him wordlessly, wondering what the heavenly demon had done to warp his mind. The Mergen standing before him still remembered him—remembered everything. In that case, did he also remember the plan he himself had devised?

“Hand it ov—”

Mergen’s eyes went wide as Lu Xu cupped his cheek with one hand and leaned in to press a kiss to his lips.

He had never imagined Lu Xu would do such a thing—yet Lu Xu’s motions were as effortless and natural as flowing water. His eyes slipped shut as he kissed him.

“Sorry,” Lu Xu said expressionlessly when their lips parted. “I couldn’t resist.”

Seizing on Mergen's momentary distraction, he ducked out from the cage of his arms with a rustle of fabric and scaled the alley wall in a few swift bounds. Mergen was slow to react; by the time he looked up, Lu Xu had vanished.

With two flying leaps, Mergen flipped onto the opposite wall, then sprang up onto the ridge of a nearby roof. All he saw was the bright moon hanging in the sky. Lu Xu was gone.

After a long, speechless moment, Mergen turned to leave, a complicated expression on his face.

Tucked out of sight between the rafters, Lu Xu gasped softly. When Mergen's footsteps faded, he sighed and slowly crawled toward the edge of the eaves, where he sat down in silence.

Dark clouds rolled across the sky once more, swallowing the moon. Raindrops as fat as soybeans pelted the roofs as a torrential downpour engulfed the city.

Lanling Amber had just closed for the night. Ashina Adarvan was preparing to lock the front doors when a rain-soaked Lu Xu slipped through the gap.

"I was just about to go looking for you," Ashina Adarvan said. "Where did you run off to?"

Lu Xu didn't answer. He seemed dazed and distraught, ignoring Ashina Adarvan as he strode into the tavern. A lamp was lit behind a folding screen where Qiu Yongsi, A-Tai, and Hanguo Lan gathered around a table, deep in discussion.

"When will Li Jinglong be back?"

"You never wanted to meet him before," Qiu Yongsi noted with a smile. "Why are you so concerned about him now?"

Hanguo Lan heaved a sigh. "How was I supposed to know a regular guy like him would rise to his current position?"

Since the reestablishment of the Department of Exorcism, Hanguo Lan had dealt with its members on a number of occasions, but it'd just so

happened that he'd been out of town during the fox yao case. He had always assumed Li Jinglong was nothing more than an ordinary mortal. He never would have expected him to be the leader of the Department of Exorcism. Hanguo Lan couldn't help but sigh—indeed, one shouldn't believe everything one heard.

"Just tell us straight… Xiao-Lu?" A-Tai looked up as Lu Xu stepped around the folding screen and made his way toward the rear courtyard.

Lu Xu hummed in response.

"Come and join us," Qiu Yongsi said.

Lu Xu ignored him—he didn't care a whit what Hanguo Lan had to say—and returned to his room. A-Tai quirked a brow at Qiu Yongsi, who shook his head with a smile. *Let him go*.

"I had no idea that black sword was one of Acalanatha's treasures," Hanguo Lan was saying. "You really think I would have sold it to him had I known?"

"Save it," A-Tai said. "Who else would buy it, if not him? And who else would actually *use it* in combat?"

"Well, speak." Qiu Yongsi dipped his brush in ink. "I'll take notes."

Hanguo Lan hesitated. "If I tell you, then you'll agree to…"

"Yes," A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi chorused.

"You can stay here at Lanling Amber for the time being," A-Tai said. "Once this mission's over, we'll escort you back home. We've been operating in secret, so no one will know your location."

Hanguo Lan mulled this over. "Very well. That sword was actually stolen from the Heavenly Hall in Luoyang…"

A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi straightened in their seats. Hanguo Lan had little knowledge of the origins of the Sword of Wisdom; he only knew that it had once belonged to Di Renjie.

According to the stories, Di Renjie had spent his entire life searching for the remaining artifacts of Acalanatha, but in all that time, he had found only this rusty old sword. Instead of being buried with Di Renjie's body, the sword had been hidden in the base of the Heavenly Hall—also known as the

Tower of Heaven. After Emperor Zhongzong, Li Xian, had ascended the throne, the Heavenly Hall had fallen into disuse, giving thieves the opportunity to break in and make off with several jade figurines as well as the weapon Di Renjie had used in life.

When the weapon landed in Hanguo Lan's hands, it had been accompanied by a letter. Although Hanguo Lan had briefly considered searching for the remaining artifacts mentioned therein, he'd quickly realized the sword was nothing more than a piece of scrap metal with no spiritual power. Soon enough, he forgot all about the letter's contents. Later, during an auction hosted by the Merchants' Guild, Hanguo Lan had instructed one of his assistants to get rid of the rusty old sword, only for the man to end up selling it to Li Jinglong for an astronomical price.

Shocked, Hanguo Lan worried that perhaps he had missed out on some rare treasure. He secretly observed Li Jinglong, but upon seeing that he did nothing of note with his new blade beyond polishing it and carrying it around all day, his renewed interest gradually faded.

"What happened to the letter?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

"Burned," Hanguo Lan said helplessly. "One night, when we were crossing the desert, we used it for kindling to keep warm and ward off the wolves…"

A-Tai waved an exasperated hand. "What about the locations of the five other artifacts?"

"I only know what was written in the letter," Hanguo Lan said. "Honestly, I thought Di Renjie left it as a joke to amuse future generations."

As Hanguo Lan told it, the letter contained no specific locations, but rather…

"What kind of gibberish is this?! How are we supposed to know what this means?" Qiu Yongsi stared at the symbols Hanguo Lan had drawn, feeling like he was about to go mad.

The carp yao flopped against the edge of the table and peered at the paper. After a moment of thought, he pointed at one of the doodles. "This one looks kind of familiar?"

A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi anxiously watched the carp yao, but even after turning the symbol over a few times in his mind, the fish couldn't seem to recall where he'd seen it before.

Hanguo Lan spread his hands. "That's all I know. Even if you ask me again, there's nothing more I can tell you."

Five strange symbols stared up at them from the paper. A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi pondered at length, but they had no idea what any of them meant. The carp yao guessed they were decorative motifs from some sort of building.

After speculating for a long while, Qiu Yongsi shrugged. "Well, in any case, we have our first clue. This is a start."

A-Tai had assumed Hanguo Lan was privy to some crucial piece of information, given that the heavenly demon was determined to kill a mere human merchant at all costs. Yet it seemed Hanguo Lan had never even heard of the heavenly demon, much less about any weakness he might have. Still, Hanguo Lan was familiar with many types of spiritual devices. If An Lushan wanted this man dead, then perhaps he held a clue to something that could restrain him. And considering that Hanguo Lan had once owned the Sword of Wisdom, it was plausible that this spiritual device was another of the six artifacts of Acalanatha.

Qiu Yongsi had planned to suggest that they go find the artifact so they could hand it over to Li Jinglong when he returned. But with such unexpectedly vague leads to go on, they would simply have to wait for Li Jinglong to come back from Luoyang before discussing what to do next.

Outside, the rain intensified, beating against the eaves and lashing the pond in the courtyard in a continuous patter.

Lu Xu lay on his bed, tossing and turning as he dreamed.

Beneath the walls of a border fortress, a dense snowstorm whipped through the night. A moment later, the clouds scattered like the primordial chaos, parting to reveal clusters of stars, as if the world had just now come into being. Cast in starlight, Mergen's handsome face appeared. He recited a series of words that seemed incomprehensible to Lu Xu, his eyes gentle as…

"The ocean."

It was Hongjun who had told him about the ocean. Lu Xu had never seen the ocean before, and neither had Hongjun, but he had heard of it—that lying at the edge of the mortal world was an infinite stretch of azure blue. They had promised each other that someday, they would go and see it together.

Supposedly, the ocean was as deep as it was boundless, and on countless nights, the thought of it had reminded Lu Xu of Mergen's blue-black eyes.

If he was honest, the mutton soup from that stall was pretty good—far more delicious than anything he'd eaten in Liang Prefecture.

When Lu Xu had first arrived in Chang'an, he'd grown accustomed to staring at Mergen's back. His shoulders were strong and broad from years of drawing his bow, and his back was like a great mountain. The sight had given Lu Xu a sense of security in this unfamiliar place, where it was too easy to feel lonely.

Lu Xu sighed as he turned over, his mouth still faintly warm where he had kissed Mergen's lips.

In the Anxi Barracks, Mergen tossed his quiver to the ground and sank down on his haunches in a corner, the image of a resentful wolf.

"Mission accomplished?" Wan Feng called from outside.

"Get lost," Mergen said coldly.

"My lord has ordered you to report—"

"I said, get lost!" Mergen snarled, his spiritual energy erupting outward. The walls shuddered.

In the ensuing silence, he closed his eyes and slowly licked his lips.

Chapter 111:
Daggers of Ice

IN THE DARKNESS, Mergen's dreams took him back to that moment in the dimly lit alleyway. This time, when Lu Xu broke their kiss, Mergen grabbed him by the throat, forcing him to tilt his head back and meet his eyes.

Lu Xu's eyes went wide with fear as Mergen dipped down and sank his teeth into his neck. For a moment, it was as if he had transformed into the wolf: His sharp canines pierced skin, drawing a burst of sweet blood that flooded into his mouth.

Eyes reflecting the dark skies, Lu Xu tipped his head back further. The black clouds parted, and starlight spilled down with a gentle susurration. The Milky Way streamed over the alleyway, so dazzling the narrow space was lit bright as day. Miraculously, the stars seemed to spin, their silver radiance drifting gently through the air.

After lapping up his blood, Mergen sucked the wound closed before reluctantly pulling away. He stared silently into Lu Xu's eyes, his gaze focused yet wild, like a predator watching the prey he had trapped and brought fully under his control.

Suddenly, Lu Xu pressed a hand to Mergen's chest. A beam of light shot through the alleyway, and Mergen vanished with a thrum.

Lu Xu's eyes flew open. The rain had stopped, and music floated in from outside, accompanied by the beating of drums. Lifting a hand, he ran his fingers gingerly over his neck. What he felt made him lurch to his feet, only to nearly fall to his knees as the world spun around him.

"Xiao-Lu?" Qiu Yongsi called from outside. "Are you sick?"

Lu Xu staggered up with difficulty. He felt dizzy, like he was walking on soft cotton. Turning to the mirror, he spied the red mark on the side of his throat.

Receiving no response, Qiu Yongsi pushed the door open. He hurried over to press a hand to Lu Xu's forehead and check his temperature.

"Damn it," Lu Xu cursed. "He followed me into my dreams."

That afternoon, after confirming that he'd caught a cold from soaking in the rain the night before, Lu Xu drank some medicine and took a seat before the others.

"His second target is Geshu Han," he said, his face slack with exhaustion.

"That's going to be a tough one," A-Tai said with a deeply furrowed brow. "Geshu Han's not nearly as easy to deal with as Hanguo Lan."

Lu Xu, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan had all met Geshu Han previously. After discussing at length, they hashed out a plan for that night. Despite their preparations, they had yet to obtain the most important piece of information—An Lushan had not told Mergen the location of the sacred flame, and only three days remained until Yang Yuhuan's birthday.

As the sun set in the west, Lu Xu, sniffling and dizzy from fever, was still pondering what to do if he encountered that bastard again. What had Mergen meant by that dream from last night?

Worried over Lu Xu's health, Qiu Yongsi had suggested Lu Xu sit out the evening's operation, but Lu Xu insisted on going. As they waited outside the general's estate, Lu Xu suddenly asked, "Which do you think is the real Mergen?"

Startled, Qiu Yongsi paused to consider the question. "They're both him," he said finally. "According to legend, when Nüwa created humanity out of river clay, she worked at her task from sunrise to sundown, from the brightest hour of day to the darkest hour of night. That's why, within our three immortal souls and seven mortal forms, there is both shadow and light."

Lu Xu was silent for a spell. "If I asked you to rank the members of the Department of Exorcism in order of intelligence, who would be the smartest, and where would that guy rank?"

Qiu Yongsi smiled without a word.

Lu Xu asked him again until Qiu Yongsi relented and answered, “The smartest, of course, is the chief. Even I fall short compared to him.” Lu Xu waited for him to continue. At long last, he said, “The stupidest is probably either you or Hongjun.”

Lu Xu was speechless.

“Some are born smart, while others are not,” Qiu Yongsi said. “But what matters most is to accept one’s natural and unadorned state. As they say, still waters run deep. Meanwhile, those who are too intelligent often live exhausting lives. It’s easy for the cleverest people to overreach themselves and become victims of their own cleverness. Being simpleminded allows for a much more carefree life, don’t you think?”

“I’m not Hongjun,” Lu Xu said. “Don’t try that philosophical stuff on me. I just want to know this: You think there are flaws in the big wolf’s plan, don’t you?”

Qiu Yongsi waved his folding fan. “No need to worry,” he said breezily. “You still have me, don’t you?”

Indeed, Lu Xu wasn’t like Hongjun, who, despite being frequently confused, always tried to make the best of things. As long as he had food to eat, a place to sleep, and Li Jinglong to love, he was content. In contrast, Lu Xu was always observing the members of the Department of Exorcism. Although they were all cunning and knew how to reach their goals strategically, each had their own area of expertise and ingenuity in which they took charge. Even when Li Jinglong was present, he still occasionally sought Qiu Yongsi’s opinion. Aside from the chief, he seemed to be the one who understood things most thoroughly.

In Li Jinglong’s absence, Mergen had stepped up as their de facto leader. But given that Qiu Yongsi had neither tried to sway Mergen from his plan nor taken the initiative to help with it, Lu Xu suspected the scholar had made his own arrangements in private.

He watched as Qiu Yongsi’s expression shifted slightly. “Xiao-Lu, haven’t you noticed?” He winked at Lu Xu, his lips curving in an enigmatic smile. “Do you really think Xie Yu would so readily trust us to deal with the heavenly demon, despite the chief’s absence? Shouldn’t he be more anxious?”

“He doesn’t seem anxious at all,” Lu Xu answered. “It’s been days. Aside from the night he revealed himself to me, he hasn’t asked about our plan.”

“Mm,” Qiu Yongsi hummed thoughtfully. “Do you think he knows what we’re doing now?”

Slowly, Lu Xu shook his head.

Qiu Yongsi’s mysterious smile deepened.

The general’s estate was silent after nightfall. In the main hall, a beautiful feathered robe with a rainbow skirt stood on display. This was Geshu Han’s birthday gift to Yang Yuhuan, which he had brought all the way from Liang Prefecture. Woven by skilled craftsmen from the Western Regions over the course of three years, the garment consisted of seven layers of cloth, shot through with gold and silver thread that glistened like a waterfall beneath the lamplight.

“She’s sure to love it,” Yang Guozhong said with a nod.

Geshu Han gestured for a servant girl to re-cover the gift with a sheet. “You’ve no idea the pains I took to purchase this robe.”

After another round of adulation from Yang Guozhong, Geshu Han invited him to his study for a drink, where they proceeded to chat for nearly an hour. As Yang Guozhong rose at last to bid him farewell, Geshu Han’s expression turned complicated.

“I suppose it’s time.” He sighed.

“This is for the future of Great Tang,” Yang Guozhong said firmly.

Geshu Han was getting on in years. His beard and hair were already grizzled, and after falling gravely ill during the incident with the corpse-ghost army in Liang Prefecture the previous winter, he seemed all the more frail. With another heavy sigh, he nodded. Yang Guozhong left without another word, and Geshu Han turned back to look at the letter he had left in the study.

“Master,” a servant girl called from outside. “The madam requests your presence.”

“I’ll be there in a bit,” Geshu Han said. He picked up the letter and carefully examined the handwriting.

Yet just a short while later, the silence was again interrupted, this time by his housekeeper. “Master.”

“I know, I’ll be right there,” Geshu Han said impatiently.

“Mergen of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism wishes to speak with you,” the housekeeper said.

Mergen? Geshu Han vaguely remembered the name. During the trouble with the corpse ghosts in Liang Prefecture, this man had stayed in his estate for quite some time recovering from his injuries. Recalling that Li Jinglong had previously come to inform him that there were yao lurking in Chang’an, Geshu Han instructed the housekeeper to send him in.

Mergen stepped into the study, unarmed and empty-handed. He scanned his surroundings without bothering to greet Geshu Han. Geshu Han tucked the letter beneath another document before glancing up at his visitor.

“What is it?” Geshu Han was more polite to members of the Department of Exorcism these days. Li Jinglong had once saved his life, after all. More pressingly, these people were under the direct command of the emperor, and they all possessed remarkable abilities. They were a force to be reckoned with.

Mergen stepped forward. He seemed distracted, as if he’d just changed his mind about something. “What did Yang Guozhong say?”

Brows arching in anger, Geshu Han was about to chew this young man out for his insolence when realization struck. “You’re not Mergen—who are you? Guards—”

Mergen’s expression shifted. He hadn’t expected Geshu Han to be so skilled at reading people that he’d see right through him. Abandoning the conversation, he flicked his fingers, directing his nailhead arrows to tear through the windows and roof tiles toward Geshu Han. Cornered, Geshu Han watched helplessly as the arrows streaked toward him, all six aiming for his vital points.

A figure in white darted before the general with a rustle of fabric.

Bursting through the window with astonishing speed, Lu Xu landed on the desk and deflected the closest arrow with his dagger. He swung around and leapt up to the rafters, blocking a second arrow before jumping back down and knocking away a third.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Lu Xu spun through the air, faster than sight, and blocked two more. The final nailhead arrow grazed his arm, slicing through fabric. Blood sprayed into the air.

Mergen leapt back as Lu Xu charged him, throwing his shoulder into Mergen's chest. All Mergen needed to do to kill Lu Xu was redirect his nailhead arrows, but he couldn't seem to do it. He sidestepped Lu Xu as if reluctant to fight him, then pressed his hands together, gathering his deflected arrows to shoot again toward Geshu Han behind him.

The entire thing had taken hardly a breath. By the time Geshu Han finished shouting for the guards, Qiu Yongsi, Ashina Adarvan, and A-Tai had burst in through the windows after Lu Xu.

Brandishing his cyclone fan, A-Tai said coldly, "You've gone too far, Brother."

He whipped his fan down, and a biting gale swept through the study, sending scrolls flying. Qiu Yongsi waved his brush, and the mountain in the landscape painting on the wall rose from the paper and came hurtling toward Mergen.

Mergen cursed as the ink mountain slammed into his chest, crushing him against the door. The wood panel snapped beneath the combined weight, and he crashed into the courtyard. Meanwhile, Ashina Adarvan loosed all six of his throwing knives, blocking Mergen's nailhead arrows.

"Lu Xu!" Qiu Yongsi cried. "Now!"

Lu Xu's hands were shaking, but after a moment of hesitation, he steeled himself. He swung his daggers in twin arcs of light, gathering the cold wind from A-Tai's fan into his blades as he hurled himself at Mergen with a heartrending cry. The first dagger sank into Mergen's waist. The second stabbed into his chest, where it lodged between his ribs.

Caught off guard by Lu Xu's ruthlessness, Mergen roared and took a vicious swing at him. The punch landed with the force of a thousand pounds, sending Lu Xu crashing into a corner of the room, ears ringing.

Qiu Yongsi, Ashina Adarvan, and A-Tai had charged over to protect Geshu Han. Mergen flipped himself up to the roof and fled in a flurry of footsteps that sent tiles flying.

Geshu Han was still staring at the exorcists, his face a mask of shock, when his guards at last arrived. Only when they were about to arrest the three supposed assassins did he gather himself and shout, "Stop, all of you!"

A-Tai, Qiu Yongsi, and Ashina Adarvan turned to Geshu Han and bowed in greeting.

"There was no time to explain. I fear we've committed a number of offenses," Qiu Yongsi said. "Please forgive us, General."

"You!" Geshu Han pointed at A-Tai. "Tell me what's going on!"

He dismissed the guards while Ashina Adarvan went to help Lu Xu to his feet. Qiu Yongsi picked up the papers scattered over the study and set them neatly back on Geshu Han's desk.

Before A-Tai could launch into an explanation, Geshu Han sneered. "I see Li Jinglong's underlings are quite the clever bunch!"

With a chuckle, Qiu Yongsi stopped what he was doing. Lu Xu sank back down against the wall, gasping for breath. His head was still buzzing from Mergen's fist.

In the Anxi Barracks, Mergen lay convulsing on a bed. He'd been stripped down to a pair of black combat trousers, leaving his injured torso bare. His eyes were open and soulless, and he was shivering from the cold.

An Lushan examined him and sneered. The daggers, still lodged in his flesh, had frozen solid. As the ice melted and spread into Mergen's body, the flesh surrounding each wound turned an alarming blue.

The second dagger had missed the tattoo of a deer's head on Mergen's chest by barely an inch.

A swarm of venomous insects streamed through the window and coalesced into Wan Feng. “My lord.”

“How did they know we were targeting Geshu Han?” An Lushan asked.

Wan Feng shook his head, bewildered. An Lushan’s corpulent face was set with malice as he glared at the shivering Mergen.

“Are we going to save him?” Wan Feng asked.

An Lushan pressed his left hand, glowing with red light, to Mergen’s chest. He grasped the first dagger with his right hand and yanked it out.

Mergen screamed. Pupils blown wide, he writhed as if engulfed by raging flames. The moment the dagger was free, the sigil inscribed on the blade glowed. The chill suffusing the blade rushed toward An Lushan.

In the general’s estate, A-Tai was halfway through his explanation when Lu Xu suddenly twitched, his gaze going blank.

He saw the world through Mergen’s eyes—he watched An Lushan toss aside the dagger and hold his hands before his chest in the shape of a flame, the gold ring adorning his left thumb flashing subtly.

The dreamscape shifted. The black wolf pinned the white deer down on a snowy field and tore into him with his fangs. Lu Xu realized all at once that Mergen had again sensed his presence. On the verge of death, Mergen clung to the nearest warm body in a desperate attempt to soak up its heat.

“Lu Xu—!”

“Xiao-Lu!”

The night wind was bitterly cold as it howled across the snow-strewn plain. In the desolate wilderness, the black wolf bit and clawed at his trapped prey. The white deer’s steaming blood soaked the ground in pulse after pulse, his body emitting a blinding light. The black wolf bared his teeth, his furious eyes filled with bloodlust.

The light folded in on itself, gathering into the white deer’s body as he shifted back into Lu Xu’s naked human form. Instead of running away, he wrapped an arm tightly around the black wolf’s scruff. The wolf was

filled with only viciousness; he opened his bloody maw and bit into Lu Xu's shoulder.

Lu Xu endured the excruciating pain as his consciousness began to fade. Just before he blacked out, he looped his other arm around the wolf's neck, pressing the length of his bare body against the animal's black fur in an embrace.

The black wolf's powerful bite had rendered the muscles of Lu Xu's shoulder a bloodied mess and nearly shattered his scapula. Yet the moment Lu Xu embraced him, the black wolf loosened his jaw and lifted his head, a lost expression appearing in his eyes. Clutching the wolf's head to his chest, Lu Xu turned to press his cheek to his muzzle, his entire body trembling uncontrollably.

The dreamscape disintegrated. Lu Xu's eyes flew open as he returned to reality.

In the study, everyone had turned to stare at him in alarm. Ashina Adarvan let out a sigh of relief. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I found it," Lu Xu said, a tremor in his voice.

Everyone's expressions changed.

At dawn, Li Jinglong and Hongjun entered the capital, hand in hand. Hongjun still seemed distracted, while Li Bai plodded along sluggishly. After a full day without a drop of wine, he was a shadow of himself. He glanced this way and that as they made their way into the city. Li Jinglong spent half his time dragging Li Bai back to their group as he tried to wander off and the other half watching out for Hongjun, while simultaneously keeping an eye out to make sure that he, a wanted fugitive, didn't get arrested. He might have had an easier time herding a pair of mindless corpse ghosts.

The moment Lanling Amber opened its doors for the day, customers rushed in. Li Jinglong slipped in through the back door to the kitchen, where the carp yao was busy beating egg batter for breakfast. Startled, the fish yelped and dumped batter down his front.

"You're ready for the wok," Li Jinglong said blandly.

“That’s not funny! Where’s Hongjun? When did you guys get back?”

Hongjun and Li Bai stepped through the door. “Is there wine?” Li Bai asked.

“I’ll fetch you some later.” Li Jinglong prodded Li Bai forward while Hongjun drifted off to change his clothes, an absent-minded expression on his face.

Chapter 112:
Turning the Tables

"HONGJUN?" Li Jinglong called. "Hurry back, we're having a meeting."

"Got it," Hongjun called back as he listlessly entered his room. The carp yao scampered in on his heels.

"How did it go? Hongjun?" His tail swished anxiously. "Did you save the divine kun?"

Hongjun gave a brief account of their journey. When he finished, the carp yao asked, "What's the matter with you?"

Hongjun considered his question, then sighed. "I dreamed of the future."

The carp yao gaped at him in shock. "Will I become a dragon?"

"I didn't dream of *you*." Hongjun dug out a new set of robes, then dragged himself over to the well to draw some water for a quick wash. "Jinglong and I—we won't be together," he said with a helpless smile.

"Oh." After a moment, the carp yao asked, "What about Mara?"

"Defeated," Hongjun said absently as he stripped off his clothes. "So at least we can rest assured on that front. What will come, will come. Life will go on."

"But the future isn't certain. They say even the divine kun can't foresee everything."

"Mm." Hongjun upended the bucket over his head, drenching his whole body with a loud splash. "But there's still the possibility."

"It'll be okay, Hongjun," the carp yao said. "I'll stay with you no matter what happens."

Hongjun smiled sadly. He picked up a soap pod and rubbed it over his skin, working up a lather. His body looked like it was carved of white marble, and his hair clung to his neck in wet tendrils. As he turned away

from the carp yao, the lines of his back and waist brimmed with youthful vigor.

“But I didn’t see if I’ll be alive or not,” Hongjun said, turning to look at him. “What if I’m dead? What if my guess is right… Maybe Jinglong really has inherited the powers of Acalanatha, and he’ll end up killing me.”

“He won’t!” the carp yao protested.

Hongjun poured another bucket over his head. As he toweled himself dry, he realized he hadn’t asked—“How are the others doing?”

“I don’t know,” the carp yao said. “They’ve been sneaking around and keeping me in the dark. They never ask me to join them when they go out either. They just tell me to stay home and take care of the cooking.”

Hongjun found this strange as well. Lately, everyone seemed reluctant to let the carp yao play any significant role in their missions. Maybe it was because he tended to be overdramatic, or maybe it was because there hadn’t been much call for oblivion pollen recently. Li Jinglong had often brought Zhao Zilong along on missions in the past—he’d even made the carp yao his own uniform. But after the two of them had gotten together—or maybe sooner, ever since they’d left Chang’an for Liang Prefecture—Li Jinglong had begun to find the carp yao a nuisance. Perhaps it was because the carp yao occasionally snarked at him, or perhaps it was because he often ruined the mood when the couple wanted a moment of privacy.

After all, who would want to get frisky with their fish-in-law carping away in a water basin beside them? Not to mention, whenever Li Jinglong tried to flirt with Hongjun, the fish would scream bloody murder—it was enough to give anyone gooseflesh. But ever since Hongjun had explained to Zhao Zilong that he really did like Li Jinglong, the carp yao had been forced to swallow his jealousy and stop meddling. Nowadays, he made himself scarce when the two of them were together.

Hongjun still had a soft spot for the carp yao. After all these years, Zhao Zilong was practically family; he would always have a place by Hongjun’s side. And he had never forgotten the carp yao’s enduring wish to become a dragon by leaping over the Dragon Gate.

“I saw Sanmen Gorge,” Hongjun said. “I’ll take you there to jump over Dragon Gate after we capture the heavenly demon.”

The carp yao’s spirits seemed to rise slightly. “All right, but…” He hesitated. “What if I don’t make it?”

“Then we’ll build a house next to it,” Hongjun said. “I’ll stay with you while you practice your cultivation.”

The carp yao was gobsmacked. Fins trembling, he started to ask *Really?*—then stopped. He seemed to sense that Hongjun was struggling with some unspoken sorrow; at last, he asked simply, “Hongjun, what’s wrong?”

Hongjun pulled on clean clothes and waved the question aside with a smile. His feelings were something he couldn’t put into words. He had once been so attached to the mortal world, but now, he found himself merely tired. It seemed none of that vibrant prosperity belonged to him after all. Once the dust settled after the final battle, everything would come to an end.

“I’m going to go look for Lu Xu,” Hongjun said. “I want to have egg pancakes—the soft kind.”

“All right,” the carp yao said. “I’ll make you one that’s golden-brown and fill it with shredded tofu and stewed pork!”

Hongjun hurried up to the second floor. Everyone had already gathered behind a folding screen, save for Li Bai, who was slouched against the railing, sipping wine, and Lu Xu, who lay in a corner with a bone-weary expression.

Noticing Lu Xu’s injuries, Hongjun cried angrily, “What happened?!”

“Head hurts,” Lu Xu said weakly. “I knocked it against something… Can you make me some medicine for the pain?”

Lu Xu’s arm was wounded as well—a superficial injury—but his headache portended something more dangerous. Hongjun hurriedly checked his eyes for any signs of bleeding of the brain, then asked him a series of questions while pressing down on his acupoints. Lu Xu watched Hongjun work in a daze, his eyes filling with tears.

Hongjun finished and knelt beside Lu Xu. “What’s wrong?”

Lu Xu reached out and wrapped his arms around him. “Let me hold you for a while,” he whispered. “I’m so tired…”

Hongjun fell silent. He glanced at the group sitting behind the screen and noted Mergen’s absence. An ominous feeling unfurled in his chest, but he didn’t ask any questions and merely hugged Lu Xu back.

Li Jinglong peeked out from behind the folding screen but didn’t interrupt. He turned back to Qiu Yongsi and continued their discussion.

“It’s too soon to act now. How many days do we have left?”

“Two,” A-Tai said. “There’s still plenty of time.”

As Li Jinglong considered this, Qiu Yongsi said, “The longer we drag this out, the greater the chances something unexpected will happen. What if An Lushan realizes those ice daggers weren’t meant to harm him, but to lure the snake from its hole…?”

“We already know the location of the sacred flame,” Ashina Adarvan said. “It’s not like he can swallow it and hide it in his stomach.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him,” Qiu Yongsi laughed. “If he figures out our plan…”

“What if we turn the tables on him, beat him at his own game?” Li Jinglong suggested. “We still have this as bait.”

He tossed a bottle onto the table with a clatter.

“You caught them?!” Qiu Yongsi exclaimed, watching the strange insect scuttle around inside.

“Just one,” Li Jinglong corrected. “We accidentally killed the other.”

“Excellent!” Qiu Yongsi said. “I was just thinking whether we ought to go capture the one that’s posing as Hanguo Lan.”

“It would be too easy to tip him off,” Li Jinglong said. “Let’s follow my plan for now. We’ll stay put for the next two days and make our move when they come knocking.”

“What happens if they don’t come?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

“They will, before the noble consort’s birthday,” Li Jinglong said. “I’m sure of it.”

On the other side of the screen, Hongjun massaged an amalgamation of different oils into the nape of Lu Xu's neck. After fetching his medicine bag, he decocted a large bowl for Lu Xu to drink to dispel the cold and improve his circulation.

"Are you going to cut my skull open?" Lu Xu asked.

Hongjun didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I never learned how to do that," he said as he channeled his spiritual energy into Lu Xu's meridians to help him clear the stagnant blood in his brain. "Why isn't anyone looking after you?" he muttered furiously.

In truth, Lu Xu's current distress was half from his sadness over Mergen and half because no one had shown him any concern, despite the fact that his injuries had only been patched up in the roughest sense. It seemed Hongjun was the only one in the Department of Exorcism who worried over him like this.

"I didn't say anything," Lu Xu admitted. "I didn't want the others to make a fuss."

Sometimes, Hongjun thought Lu Xu was a walking contradiction. He liked Mergen, but he wouldn't tell him, and when he got injured, he remained silent. He always held himself apart, as if he relished feeling lonely and abandoned.

"Did Mergen do this to you?" Hongjun asked.

Lu Xu hummed softly in affirmation, and Hongjun's temper flared again. "Where is he? Has he lost his mind?!"

Hongjun's first thought was that Mergen and Lu Xu had gotten into another fight. Even after Lu Xu explained the situation, he still found himself struggling to understand. "Wait, I'm not quite sure I get it…"

"Basically, he's gone undercover," Lu Xu said. "And to ensure he can't leak any secrets, he's completely succumbed to demonhood."

"But he knows the plan that you guys came up with."

"I used a dream to wipe his memories of the details," Lu Xu explained. "The only thing he remembers right now is the night we'll make our move…"

"You can do that?" Hongjun asked in shock.

“Of course. Dreams have the power to change people’s minds. For example, let’s say I construct a memory for you in which you’ve lived your entire life as an ordinary mortal in Chang’an. I take that memory and insert it into one of your dreams. Then, let’s say everyone in the Department of Exorcism disappears overnight without a trace. Who will you think you are when you wake up?”

For a moment, Hongjun found himself speechless as he recalled the story of Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly—had Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, or had the butterfly dreamed he was Zhuang Zhou?

“Anyway,” Lu Xu said after a pause. “How are you? How was your trip?”

Hongjun slung an arm around Lu Xu’s shoulders and quietly told him all that had transpired since they’d seen each other last. When the meeting behind the screen ended, Li Jinglong and the others watched as Hongjun and Lu Xu—reunited at last—once again sat whispering with their heads together. Their conversation continued late into the night, until Li Jinglong finished arranging everything and dragged Hongjun to their room to get ready for bed.

“It’s almost over,” Li Jinglong said as he stepped inside. He had just finished washing in the rear courtyard and wore only his undergarments. “Something on your mind?”

“No,” Hongjun answered quietly.

He recalled Lu Xu’s words, as well as the dream the kun had shown him. During their hushed conversation, he had assured Lu Xu that he and Mergen still had plenty of time. *At least you aren’t fated to separate. As long as you’re both still among the living, there’ll always be another chance.*

Staring at Li Jinglong in a daze, he reached out to touch his face. Li Jinglong grabbed his hand.

“Yongsi found some clues that might lead us to the other artifacts of Acalanatha,” he said, his voice low. “I talked to the others. Once we defeat An Lushan, we’ll leave Xie Yu alone for the time being and track down the remaining artifacts. Once we’ve collected all six, I’ll get rid of him once and for all.”

He leaned forward, growing more intent. “We’ll stay together. No matter what the divine kun showed you—believe me, Hongjun. When have I ever broken a promise to you?”

The moment he uttered those words, that beacon of hope seemed to blaze again in Hongjun’s heart. It was true: Li Jinglong had indeed fulfilled every promise he had ever made him.

“There’s one condition though.” Li Jinglong smiled as he pulled Hongjun down to sit on the bed.

“What condition?” Hongjun asked, nervous now.

Wrapping an arm around him, Li Jinglong leaned down for a kiss. With utmost seriousness, he said, “We didn’t do it last night…and we haven’t been able to touch each other all day.”

Hongjun giggled. “If you want it, then come on. But didn’t we just do it for three days straight?”

“I thought about it,” Li Jinglong said. “We don’t have a fixed schedule, which is no good. Promise me that moving forward, we’ll do it at least twice a day—once in the morning when we wake up and once in the evening before bed. And if time permits, a third time around noon…”

Hongjun was about to lose it. “That’s not possible!”

Even one round with Li Jinglong took nearly two hours; Hongjun would die from exhaustion. Li Jinglong nuzzled his cheek. “Then how about thrice every two days?”

“Once a day at most!” Though to be honest, Hongjun couldn’t help swallowing in anticipation at the thought of doing it that often.

“In that case, we’ll have to make up for any days we miss.”

Torn between laughter and tears, Hongjun said, “But if I’m too tired, I can’t—”

The rest was cut off as Li Jinglong pinned him to the bed. A thought struck Hongjun. “Zhao Zilong said…”

Li Jinglong pulled back with a frown.

Hongjun hadn’t stopped thinking about how, ever since they’d become a couple, Li Jinglong had been deliberately excluding Zhao Zilong.

He wanted to bring the carp yao along on their next mission.

Li Jinglong, on the other hand, was utterly baffled as to why Hongjun was bringing this up all of a sudden. “My dear wife, we’re in bed, I’m hard enough to burst, and you’re talking to me about the fish?”

Hongjun threw his arms around Li Jinglong’s neck and dissolved into laughter. Paying no attention to Hongjun’s teasing, Li Jinglong tugged open both of their robes and pressed him down into the sheets.

The malign energy within Mergen intensified with the deepening of the night. The lamps in Lanling Amber had long been extinguished, leaving the place pitch-dark when Mergen snuck in without a sound.

Lu Xu had just finished changing the dressing on his wound. He rose to his feet, then flinched when he spotted a black shadow in the corner of his room.

“I only need to shout, and the others will come,” Lu Xu said.

“But you won’t,” Mergen replied.

Lu Xu’s breath quickened as Mergen took a slow step forward, but he did not retreat.

“Why not?” Lu Xu asked.

“Look down.”

Lu Xu did. He saw Mergen’s seventh nailhead arrow, which Mergen had given to him before going undercover. Lu Xu had strung it on a red cord and set it on the table. Now, it rose slowly into the air, its gleaming point aimed at his neck.

“Because I’ll slit your throat first,” Mergen said, his voice dark with menace. “What did you do to me? How did you know my second target was Geshu Han?”

“Just a guess.” Lu Xu thought for a moment, then continued, “Geshu Han is a close ally of Yang Guozhong. If An Lushan wants to act, he must get rid of him first.”

“Then why don’t you guess who my third target is?” Mergen asked. “If you’re wrong, I’ll kill you.”

“Me,” Lu Xu said, serene.

Standing in the darkness, Mergen didn’t speak for a very long time.

“Go on then,” Lu Xu said, closing his eyes.

He was trembling all over, but he merely stood there, waiting in silence. A long time later—after what could have been either a million years or a few minutes—the arrow clattered to the ground. Lu Xu’s eyes flew open as a gust of wind rushed through the open door.

Mergen had disappeared without a trace.

Lu Xu’s breath quickened. He dashed outside at a desperate sprint and flew onto the rooftop.

Standing in the middle of the courtyard, Li Jinglong called, “Get down from there.”

Lu Xu hesitated, wanting to give chase. Li Jinglong repeated sharply, “I said, get down!”

Lamps flared to life in all the rooms, and everyone emerged one by one. Hongjun stared in wonder at Lu Xu, who was still struggling to understand what had happened.

“Congratulations, Lu Xu,” Hongjun murmured at last, breaking into a smile.

“Wh…what?” Lu Xu was utterly perplexed.

“He didn’t tell An Lushan you can enter his dreams,” Li Jinglong said casually, his outer robe hanging open over his chest. “Otherwise, the gu apes would have followed him here.”

“Right,” Lu Xu said. “But so what? Why are you congratulating me?”

Everyone began to laugh. A gesture from Li Jinglong dispersed the group, leaving only Hongjun standing in the corridor in his white undergarments.

Hongjun motioned for Lu Xu to sit down with him beneath the eaves. Leaning closer, he whispered, “Why would he keep your secret when you’ve just stabbed him twice? Not to mention, he didn’t even try to attack you just now.”

Lu Xu had no idea what Hongjun was getting at.

“He must have fallen for you!” Hongjun said. “What other reason could there be?”

Lu Xu was at a complete loss for words.

Chapter 113:
Problems Proliferate

EVERYONE RETURNED to their rooms. At midnight, someone knocked softly on Hongjun and Li Jinglong's door. Li Jinglong threw some clothes on and padded softly out. A few minutes later, Hongjun followed, rubbing his eyes. He peered through the half-open door and spied Li Jinglong drinking with Li Bai and Li Guinian, then stumbled back to bed.

When he woke up next, sunlight was streaming in through the window. There was only one day left until Noble Consort Yang's birthday. On the second floor of Lanling Amber, Li Jinglong had spread a map on the table, showing the banquet venue inside Xingqing Palace, which included the entire space from the Mingguang Gate to the Tongyang Gate.

Yang Yuhuan would ride out in a carriage with Li Longji to greet the public at the appointed hour; in preparation, the security throughout the city could hardly be tighter. To prevent any attempted assassinations, the six divisions of the imperial guard had made Chang'an practically impregnable. Archers were stationed on rooftops, second-floor balconies, and high towers everywhere—including Lanling Amber. That evening, the Shenwu Guard would be coming to take over the tavern. As a wanted man, Li Jinglong would naturally be quitting the premises before then.

After touring Chang'an, the emperor and the noble consort would return to Xingqing Palace, where they would hold a banquet before Tongyang Gate. The banquet's attendees included various foreign emissaries and high officials of the imperial court, and the grand celebration was set to last a full three days and nights. The officials and emissaries would take turns making toasts, and a stage had been erected in the center of everything for the many performances planned, which included acrobatics, the dance of the rainbow skirt and feathered robe—a dance personally choreographed for the noble consort by the emperor himself—and various war dances.

Li Jinglong stood before the table and marked the map beneath the morning sun. "When the time comes, we'll split into three groups," he

explained. “The first group will steal An Lushan’s ring. The second will guard the dais at Daci’en Temple and dispel the heavenly demon’s illusion. The third will deal with Mergen.”

As he spoke, he passed out authority tokens like those typically carried by imperial guards on duty. Lu Xu accepted his without a word. Li Jinglong gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder before continuing. “Though they are not members of our department, Taibai-xiong and Master Li Guinian will be offering their support on this mission.”

Warmed by the sun falling on his shoulders, Hongjun recalled Li Jinglong’s meeting last night. If all went according to plan, this would be the Department of Exorcism’s most magnificent lineup since its reestablishment—to think they would be working with Li Bai himself! Out of consideration for Hongjun, Li Jinglong had even gone the extra mile and grouped him with Li Bai and Li Guinian.

“It’s because you guys aren’t expected to engage in combat,” Lu Xu said expressionlessly. “That group is the least dangerous. But don’t worry, backup is still important. Promise me you’ll be safe, all right?”

“Well look at you! Don’t get too cocky just because I’ve got your back!” Hongjun shot back.

Lu Xu burst into laughter, hooking Hongjun toward him with an arm around his neck so he could smack him. Hongjun grabbed him back, trying to flip him over and onto the ground. The two of them tussled; Lu Xu was faster, but Hongjun was stronger. After trading a few blows, Lu Xu begged for mercy. “Enough, enough!”

Hoofbeats on the street outside the tavern cut through the sounds of their scuffle. Li Jinglong stepped over to the railing and glanced down. A man in sumptuous robes led five horses—fast-running steeds specially sent by Yang Guozhong.

While Turandokht brought the horses into the rear courtyard, Li Jinglong remained against the railing, peering into the distance. He whistled at Lu Xu and Hongjun, jerking his chin toward the road below. Lu Xu followed his gaze: A warrior dressed in black darted out of sight across the street.

“It’s Mergen!” Hongjun jumped up, ready to run downstairs. Li Jinglong and Lu Xu pulled him back.

“Everyone, gather round!” Li Jinglong ordered.

Li Guinian climbed the stairs as well, joining the Department of Exorcism.

“That’s the plan, then,” Li Jinglong said after he finished going over everyone’s roles one last time. “Does everyone understand?”

Qiu Yongsi, A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, Lu Xu, Hongjun, Li Guinian, and Li Bai nodded. The carp yao, sitting beside them, would join Hongjun’s group, while Turandokht would remain at the tavern to help coordinate.

After a long silence, Li Jinglong said, “We’re down one member… It’s going to be tough this time, exorcising the demon.”

Li Bai smiled. “It’s my duty to help.”

“I can’t thank the Marquis of Yardang enough for your help retrieving the sacred flame,” Li Guinian added. “There’s really no need to stand on ceremony.”

“In that case, let’s split up now and give our all in tomorrow’s fight,” Li Jinglong said. “Once the battle is over, we’ll gather again for a proper celebration!”

As everyone cheered, Li Guinian smiled. “An excellent plan. Shall I play something for my good brothers before we part?”

He strummed his pipa, and everyone quieted their talk to listen. Hongjun’s mind drifted as he thought again about the demon seed inside him and Li Jinglong’s promise… He glanced at Li Jinglong, only to find him looking back, his eyes dancing.

“Guinian-xiong can play the pipa,” Li Bai said, “but I have nothing to help boost morale. Why don’t I write a poem? Bring me a brush and paper!”

Stunned, Hongjun hastily fetched what he asked for. Li Bai drained his cup of wine and laughed brightly. “Ah, but I need to save my words—I still have to write a celebratory poem for the noble consort’s birthday…”

“If it’s Taibai-xiong, even a few casually dashed off verses are sure to be a masterpiece,” Li Guinian said with a smile.

Hongjun couldn’t help whooping as he watched Li Bai compose a poem in real time. His lifelong wish had finally come true.

“Calm down,” Li Jinglong said. “They’ll hear you outside…”

On the roof of Lanling Amber, Mergen crouched in silence, dressed in robes of everyday cloth instead of his usual hides, his quiver strapped to his back. His eyes looked lost as he stared into the distance.

That afternoon, after the exorcists dispersed, Li Jinglong brought Hongjun to Feng Changqing’s residence. Though Hongjun was already acquainted with Li Jinglong’s cousin, this was his first time visiting his home. But with the whole city still on the hunt for Li Jinglong, this was the only safe place for them to stay the night.

Feng Changqing neither criticized Li Jinglong nor asked any unnecessary questions. He cast his cousin a cool glance. “You’re back?”

Li Jinglong nodded. Feng Changqing called for his servants to prepare a meal, then turned back to them. “And I assume you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes.”

Feng Changqing asked nothing more. After dinner, Li Jinglong inquired about the specifics of the birthday banquet arrangements, and Feng Changqing told him everything he knew.

That night, Li Jinglong lay on their borrowed bed deep in thought, his head pillowed on his arm. Hongjun sat beside him and studied his face.

“What is it?” Li Jinglong asked, his expression shifting slightly.

Hongjun shook his head with a smile. He and Li Jinglong were becoming more like a young married couple by the day. “Nothing.”

Li Jinglong patted the space beside him, inviting Hongjun to come closer. Hongjun scooted over, still gazing down at him.

“We’ll take care of An Lushan tomorrow,” Li Jinglong said solemnly. “We’ll dispel his demonic energy…and then we’ll put an end to Yang

Guozhong.”

“What if the demonic energy can’t be dispelled?”

“You’re afraid it won’t work?” Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “I’m actually not that worried. The demon seed in An Lushan was created from one of Yang Guozhong’s souls. As long as we seize the sacred flame An Lushan’s using to protect himself, then purify him by infusing the Sword of Wisdom with the heart lamp’s power, there’s no reason we shouldn’t be able to force the demonic energy out. Yang Guozhong will recover his soul—but I’m more concerned about the possibility of a revolt breaking out in the city if An Lushan’s killed. We’ll have to leave that to Yang Guozhong and General Geshu Han.”

“Aren’t you worried it’ll be the same as what happened in Dunhuang? That I’ll—”

“You can’t.” Li Jinglong smiled and tapped his fingers against Hongjun’s chest. “I’ve sealed your demon seed. I’m your fated nemesis.”

“Who told you that?” Hongjun looked at him incredulously. “What else did you and the divine kun talk about that night?”

The corner of Li Jinglong’s mouth quirked up. He stared at Hongjun as if entranced. “He told me everything would be okay.”

Hongjun said nothing, but his expression relaxed a fraction.

“He told me how to use the heart lamp to expel the darkness in the world,” Li Jinglong continued. “Think of it like this: If the six artifacts of Acalanatha use violent force to vanquish demons and yao, then the heart lamp of Dipamkara uses a gentler power to dispel demonic energy.”

“It’s a pretty lucky coincidence then, that you have both the heart lamp and the Sword of Wisdom.”

“That’s true,” Li Jinglong said. “If I only had the Sword of Wisdom or another of the artifacts of Acalanatha, perhaps one day, we really would meet in a battle to the death. That must be why the divine kun sent you to give me the heart lamp.”

Hongjun jolted in realization. Neither the divine kun’s dreamscape, his own childhood memories, nor Di Renjie’s predictions had included the heart lamp. He finally understood the source of Li Jinglong’s confidence:

The heart lamp was an unaccounted variable—one that could change the future.

“The divine kun said the lamp is a light that illuminates the night.” Li Jinglong raised his left hand, and it radiated a gentle glow that lit up the room.

A sudden clatter sounded in the neighboring room, followed by the creak of a door opening. Both of them whipped around. Li Jinglong jumped to his feet and burst out of their room and into the courtyard with Hongjun just a step behind.

A fleet-footed shadow vanished across the rooftops. They instantly reached a tacit agreement: Hongjun raced back inside in case it was a ruse, while Li Jinglong leapt onto the roof to give chase.

Beneath the pale glow of the moon, Li Jinglong shouted, “Halt!”

Mergen was carrying what appeared to be a heavy burlap sack, and Li Jinglong was barefoot; both were limited when it came to speed. As Mergen approached the end of a roof beam, he took a flying leap, the sack swinging behind him. With a shrill whistle, his nailhead arrows streaked past, smashing the edge of the roof behind him to pieces.

By the time Li Jinglong caught up, the splintered tiles had fallen from the wreckage of the roof. His adversary stood merely thirty feet away, but there was no way he could close the distance. He stood quietly on the eaves, staring at the burlap sack slung over Mergen’s back. Mergen slowly turned to look back at him.

“Give him back,” Li Jinglong said, guessing at who was inside the sack. “Let’s fight this out. You’ve been wanting to see who’s stronger, haven’t you?”

“You’re not my enemy,” Mergen said, voice low. “I’m not fighting you.”

Li Jinglong looked back at him, bewildered.

“Lord Mara doesn’t really want to fight you either,” Mergen continued, patting the burlap sack. “He’s just curious whether a self-proclaimed beacon of righteousness like yourself will descend into demonhood after losing someone you call family.”

Li Jinglong trembled; there was now no doubt whom Mergen had captured.

“Don’t do anything rash,” Mergen said. He raised a finger to his lips in a hushing gesture. “I’ll be waiting for you at the Anxi Barracks tomorrow at noon. Come then if you want to make a trade. If you’re lucky, maybe this one will still be alive when the time comes.”

With those parting words, Mergen dashed away, fast as lightning. Li Jinglong’s furious cry shattered the night. He broke into a mad sprint, mustering all his strength as he leapt across the gap—

He missed by half an inch. Li Jinglong smashed into the opposite rooftop, broken tile slicing his bare feet and leaving trails of blood as he plummeted to the ground. Splintered masonry rained down around him as he landed hard on a handcart behind the residence; body racked with pain, he slowly closed his eyes.

Early the next morning, Hongjun wrapped bandages around Li Jinglong’s shredded feet while Lu Xu gazed down at him, his brow crimped with worry.

“Change of plans,” Li Jinglong said. “I have to go to the Anxi Barracks to find my cousin.”

The chaos of last night was still fresh in his mind. Hongjun never would have guessed that An Lushan’s third target was Feng Changqing. Li Jinglong, too, had planned for every possible contingency, save for this. If only Mergen hadn’t caught Lu Xu inside his dreams, he might have glimpsed this vital piece of information. Now it was too late.

“Let me deal with Mergen,” Lu Xu said.

“You can’t dispel the demonic energy in him,” Li Jinglong said with a frown.

“What if Lu Xu and I go together?” Hongjun suggested. “We’ll catch him and bring him back here.”

“That’s not necessary,” Lu Xu said, stalling him with a raised hand. “I have my own methods.”

Without Li Jinglong's heart lamp, Hongjun was afraid Mergen would leave Lu Xu gravely wounded. But Lu Xu had grown bold after his last encounter with Mergen.

"I can seal the demonic energy in him too," Lu Xu said. "The same way you sealed the demon seed in Hongjun. Right?"

Li Jinglong looked up sharply as Lu Xu continued, "Leave him to me. We'll stick to the plan—you go save your cousin, and Hongjun will go to the birthday banquet."

Hongjun beamed. "That's right!"

Lu Xu left without a backward glance, while Hongjun lingered, gazing at Li Jinglong for confirmation. After a moment of thought, Li Jinglong nodded. "We stick to the plan."

Chang'an was packed with people. In addition to the capital's population of almost a million, visitors from the surrounding Guanzhong Plain, Luoyang, and even the far-flung Ba-Shu region had flocked to the city for the grand occasion.

Crowds crammed into the streets, where hundred-beast diagrams—their name homophonous with *long life*—could be seen hanging on every wall of every edifice alongside the characters for *longevity* and *fortune*. Over a thousand food stalls had set up shop on Imperial Street, completely sponsored by the imperial family, allowing everyone to eat their fill. The roadsides thronged with entertainers hired by the court, playing jubilant music, throwing money into the crowd, and preparing all sorts of delicacies.

Trapped in the mob, Hongjun, with the carp yao on his back, could barely take a step forward. By the time he rendezvoused with Li Bai and Li Guinian on the front steps of Daci'en Temple, he was drenched with sweat. Even this holy place of worship was bedecked in finery for the occasion, the magnificent sight of its walls accompanied by the sound of Buddhist chanting soaring into the sky.

"Finally found you guys!" Hongjun exclaimed. "Something happened this morning, so I couldn't get here earlier to get a spot…"

Li Longji would soon accompany Yang Yuhuan to Daci'en Temple, where the imperial couple would receive the people's felicitations. The area around the imperial throne set up at the temple gates was already packed with crowds, with nary a foot of space to stand.

"No matter," Li Guinian said cheerily. "Taibai-xiong here has his own specially reserved seat. All we need to do is follow him."

Li Bai, yet to shake off his hangover, hummed vaguely in agreement. He looked around absently. "Follow me? Oh right, let's go find the abbot…"

He shouldered the guards aside and called into the temple grounds. A passing monk started in surprise and bustled over to let him in.

"Master Li Bai, what are you doing wandering around outside at a time like this? Shouldn't you be in the palace? And Master Li Guinian's here, as well. Sirs, please follow me."

Hongjun had been worried the imperial guard would bar their way, but Li Bai's and Li Guinian's faces were more effective than any authority token. Before he knew it, they'd entered the temple. Holding a folding fan up to hide his face and clinging to Li Bai's sleeve, Hongjun hurried along at their heels.

The temple's abbot was up to his ears in arrangements for the emperor's visit and had not a moment to spare to attend to them. Even so, they waited only a few minutes before a young novice monk led them up to the sutra depository on the third floor, where they had an unobstructed view of the proceedings outside.

The carp yao hopped down from the pack on Hongjun's back. "Hey, I've been here before!"

It seemed Great Master Xuanzang had once come here to expound on scripture while the carp yao had listened from beneath the altar. Hongjun followed Zhao Zilong to the window and gazed out at the crowds below in curiosity.

"What are we here for again?" Li Guinian asked.

"We're here to exorcise a yaoguai and protect the noble consort and His Majesty," Hongjun reminded him.

“Oh?” Li Bai piped up. “What kind of yaoguai?”

The carp yao was appalled. “You guys spent forever discussing the plan yesterday—weren’t you listening?!”

Li Bai was prone to daydreaming. “I was drunk,” he said. “Speaking of, someone bring me some wine—”

“Drinking is forbidden in Daci’en Temple!” the carp yao snapped.

“How can you speak to Taibai-xiong like that?!” Hongjun yelped, then quickly lowered his voice. “Taibai-xiong, I’m very sorry, but I don’t think we’re allowed to drink in Daci’en Temple…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Li Bai said. “I’m allowed to drink as long as I don’t do it in the Mahavira Hall.”

Still dubious, Hongjun fetched some of the wine he’d brought along for Li Bai. “Then, shall I explain the plan to you again?”

“No need,” Li Bai said with a wave of his hand. “Just call me when you need me. I’ll attack wherever you point.”

Chapter 114:
Inevitable Decline

HONGJUN SNAPPED his fingers and smiled. “Actually, it’s the same type of yaoguai we fought in Luoyang. Jinglong said you’re both highly favored by His Majesty, so no matter how suspicious His Majesty is, he’ll never doubt the two of you.”

He gazed outside again and narrowed his eyes at a brief flash among the crowd—Qiu Yongsi’s signal. Everyone was in position.

“All right.” Li Guinian beamed. “In that case, we’ll follow our little brother here’s orders.”

“Um…” Hongjun was still a bit starstruck. He’d never expected Li Jinglong to be so thoughtful that he’d group Hongjun with two of his idols. This was truly the pinnacle of his life—though he couldn’t help but worry when he recalled what Li Jinglong was facing.

Outside Xingqing Palace, the gongs crashed and drums rumbled as noon approached. The imperial guard surged out like the tide to clear the way for Li Longji. The palace gates swung open, and a resplendent carriage drove out amid the fluttering of silk brocade banners and the deafening cheers of the crowd. It was a magnificent scene, reminiscent of those lines from Wang Wei’s “Reply to Treasurer Jia Attending Morning Court at Daming Palace”: *By the light of dawn, past the myriad palace gates, officials and envoys fall to their knees before the tasseled crown.*

Hongjun hurried over to a different window and gazed at the streets below.

“Hear that?” Li Guinian suddenly asked.

Hongjun looked up, puzzled.

“Mm…” Li Bai hummed in acknowledgment.

Hongjun had no idea what he was supposed to be hearing, but Li Guinian and Li Bai exchanged a knowing smile.

“There’s something rather foreboding about this prosperous scene,” Li Bai mused.

Li Guinian gestured sharply for him to be quiet, but Li Bai continued with a sigh. “It seems the ginkgo tree in Gold Blossom’s Fall has been withering since the day the emperor made Yang Guozhong grind my ink and Gao Lishi remove my boots.”[1]

“What did you hear?” Hongjun was still struggling with Li Guinian’s question.

“They’re all cheering for the emperor, but not the noble consort,” the carp yao explained grimly.

Now that Hongjun was listening, he found it was true. As the carriage rolled down Imperial Street, the citizens mostly shouted “Your Majesty”; very few shouted “Your Grace.” Watching the eunuchs toss money and food into the crowds, Hongjun wondered momentarily whether they were offering them the people’s lifeblood.

“The Yang family has roused widespread indignation and discontent,” Li Guinian said. “Rumor has it that even the imperial guard has long resented them.”

“Is this about the military provisions?” Hongjun vaguely recalled Li Jinglong mentioning that Yang Guozhong had embezzled a vast amount of provisions meant for the army. Apparently, the Yang family had been humiliating military officials in the imperial court for years.

“Not just that,” Li Guinian said. “All the Yang family’s prosperity has been paid for with the lives of the nation’s soldiers. Even their servants have committed all manner of atrocities, including raping soldiers’ widows and seizing their property.”

Li Bai sighed regretfully. “Who wouldn’t hate the murderers of their parents or the rapists of their wives and children? Sooner or later, these accounts will have to be settled.”

Li Guinian sighed as well, shaking his head. He looked pointedly at Hongjun. Hongjun nodded, grasping his meaning at once: He should avoid mentioning anything to Li Bai about Yang Guozhong’s true identity, lest the man drunkenly spill the story about Xie Yu to Li Longji and ruin Li Jinglong’s plan.

After listening in on Li Bai and Li Guinian’s discussion, Hongjun found himself touched with foreboding as well, as if the thriving scene outside was no more than the final feast before the great edifice of human achievement collapsed—a swan song performed moments before the curtain fell.

This was the atmosphere that accompanied the ending of all great things—a creeping sense of desolation beneath seemingly boundless prosperity, a sign that these thriving scenes would soon draw to a close.

The blazing sun hung high in the sky as Yang Yuhuan and her sisters processed down Imperial Street in the emperor’s carriage, a teeming crowd following in their wake. Li Longji’s favored concubines were all richly attired in gauzy layered skirts and glittering jewels, their eyebrows elegantly drawn and their lips painted a brilliant red. An assortment of hairpins adorned their elaborate coiffures, and their necks and ears clinked with jade pendants and tortoiseshell earrings. Each was weighed down with no less than five pounds of jewelry for the occasion.

The Duchess of Han bit her lip. “It’s so hot out.”

“Bear with it,” Yang Guozhong said as he scanned their surroundings. “Yuhuan’s wearing more than you.”

The women’s makeup had begun to smear from sweat. Even Li Longji was struggling with the heat as they continued down the street. Yang Yuhuan was smiling softly when someone shouted, “The treacherous concubine brings ruin upon the nation; evil threatens the fate of our Great Tang!”

Yang Yuhuan blanched as the crowd broke into an uproar. Li Heng, riding at the fore, whipped his head back, searching among the rabble, but the culprit had already disappeared into the crush. Furious, Li Longji was about to order a thorough search when Yang Yuhuan pacified him with a gentle wave of her hand.

“Your Majesty, this consort is already more than satisfied with such a grand celebration,” Yang Yuhuan said with a smile. “That scoundrel just now was likely only trying to cause trouble out of jealousy for my cousin. It

won’t be too late to launch an investigation later—what need is there to ruin the festive atmosphere?”

Indeed, it wouldn’t do to spoil a day of celebration. Li Longji sighed deeply and dropped the matter. As the procession made its way to the end of Imperial Street and turned toward Daci’en Temple, the entirety of Chang’an’s populace surged toward the temple gates.

Beneath the glare of the sun, Li Jinglong wove through streets and alleyways to arrive before the Anxi Barracks’ gates. The place was deserted; An Lushan and his men had all left to attend Noble Consort Yang’s three-day banquet at Xingqing Palace.

The Anxi Barracks seemed to shimmer in the scorching heat, their empty interior a void of deathly silence. Li Jinglong stood before the open gate, his shadow reduced to a sliver beneath the noonday sun. Sweat dripped from his face onto the ground.

A seal flared over the barracks’ gate—the same transportation array used by the nine-tailed fox, and again by Wan Jue in Luoyang. Li Jinglong was certain that the moment he stepped over the threshold, he would be transported to another akasha realm.

But even this Li Jinglong had prepared for. Just as he was about to stride across, a voice rang out from within: “Leave the Sword of Wisdom outside.”

Li Jinglong unstrapped the blade and left it leaning against the gate. He lifted a hand and stepped inside. With a thrum and a flash of light, he was transported to a different world.

The distant clamor gradually subsided as Mergen, clad now in black leather armor, darted through a narrow alleyway with his quiver on his back.

Lu Xu, all in white, dropped into the alley, blocking his path. “Whose life are you taking this time?”

Mergen’s face, obscured by his helmet, clouded over as he stared steadily at Lu Xu.

Lu Xu cracked his knuckles; he had come empty-handed.

“Let me guess,” Lu Xu began slowly. “It’s Hongjun—isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Mergen rasped.

“Did you forget what I said?” Lu Xu asked.

“You won’t let anyone hurt so much as a hair on his head,” Mergen said grimly. “What I don’t understand is why you two always look like you’re ready to die for each other.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Lu Xu said. “But even if you manage to defeat me, Hongjun might be a tougher opponent than you think.”

“Don’t forget who it was that dragged you back from Dunhuang.”

“Ever since then, I’ve been wanting to see which of us is stronger. It seems you won’t accept the result until I give you a proper thrashing.”

“You’re no match for me,” Mergen sneered.

“Shall we bet on it?” Lu Xu returned, voice low. “If you lose, you’ll come with me.”

“And if I win?” Mergen asked, unfazed.

“You can do with me as you like.” Lu Xu crossed his arms in front of his chest then slid his foot back, settling into a fighting stance with his palms flattened into blades. “Go on, then,” he said. “No arrows allowed.”

Mergen mirrored his movements, easing into a stance with his fists held before his chest. His hunting boots raised a trail of dust as they slid over the ground.

“Do your worst,” Mergen bit out.

A whisper of fabric was the only warning as the pair shot forward and collided in a flurry of black and white.

Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan reached Daci’en Temple surrounded by the cheers of the crowd. The temple bell rang, and the abbot emerged, joined by sixteen senior monks, all dressed in the saffron-colored kasaya of their order. Yang Yuhuan pressed her palms together, standing at Li Longji’s side as they bowed in greeting. The hollow clack of mallets striking wooden

fish sounded on both sides of the road, accompanying the monks' voices raised in prayer. Silence settled over the square outside Daci'en Temple as the people fell to their knees.

Hongjun had never seen such a massive crowd. There were so many people moving at once, yet it was surprisingly orderly. Nearly three quarters of the common folk of Chang'an, as well as all of the city's prominent families and Buddhist foreigners, prostrated themselves to pray for the well-being of Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan.

When the recitation ended, the abbot stepped back, and the people rose to their feet. Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan made their way up the steps leading into Daci'en to take their seats before the temple's front gate, and the crowd once again broke into thunderous cheers.

Hu Sheng, captain of the Longwu Guard, looked on with watchful eyes as people surged toward the emperor and noble consort to pay their respects. He and his men methodically monitored the crowd, ensuring that each group of a thousand immediately took their leave after making the requisite nine kowtows before the temple. The first group consisted of the residents of the outer city, followed by the residents of the inner city. Then there were the foreign merchants, the various tradesmen, the untitled wealthy, and the scholars and civil officials of sixth rank and below. Finally, the imperial guard and military officials of fifth rank and below stepped up to take their places.

Qiu Yongsi followed the crowd, gazing out over the sea of soldiers and civilians. The gu ape Greed, disguised as Hanguo Lan, stood a hundred feet away at the head of the foreign merchants, awaiting his turn to pay his respects to the emperor.

Geshu Han did not appear; evidently, An Lushan had had second thoughts about incorporating him into his plans. Of the four cardinal vices, only one was present at the scene. Even if it were to transform into a former emperor again and appear here, this time before the masses, its power should be greatly reduced now without the others working in tandem. It was anyone's guess whether An Lushan had been notified of Lust and Wine's death and capture at the hands of Li Jinglong, but the fact that neither had returned to Chang'an had changed the situation regardless. The gu ape

posing as Hanguo Lan had no choice but to complete the mission on its own.

Qiu Yongsi produced a mirror from his sleeve and held it up to reflect the sunlight as he tried to guess whom Greed would transform into.

Hongjun watched Qiu Yongsi's signal flash again, then turned to Li Bai and Li Guinian. "We should get ready too."

The three of them parted ways at the door. Li Bai headed east, while Hongjun and Li Guinian turned west, quickly passing through the floating open-air corridor on the second floor of Daci'en Temple.

"Fox yao can transform as well. Why are gu apes so much more troublesome?" Hongjun wondered aloud as he scanned the crowd for Hanguo Lan.

"To assume the appearance of a living person, a fox yao must first absorb their essence," Li Guinian explained. "Different yao have different transformation techniques, but they all have a fixed original form. Only gu apes can use hair, nails, or other pieces of a deceased person to reconstruct the details of whomever they impersonate. They don't necessarily have to transform into humans, either; they can just as easily shift into a flower, a tree, a house, or a great boulder—it's just that there isn't much point in turning into those things."

"You guys'll protect His Majesty and the noble consort—"

"You've said it several times already," Li Guinian said with a smile. "I won't forget."

This was Hongjun's first time leading such a mission, and he was jittery with nerves as he looked down toward the entrance of Daci'en Temple, where Yang Yuhuan and Li Longji sat with their faces toward the crowd.

Inside Xingqing Palace, A-Tai cut a dashing figure in a sleeveless vest paired with long silk pants. His fair skin, pale as milk, made a charming contrast with his deep indigo eyes and brown curls. Ashina

Adarvan, meanwhile, had changed into a set of eunuch's robes and shaved his short beard.

"Wouldn't we have been better off sending Turandokht?" A-Tai whispered.

"He likes boys," Ashina Adarvan said. "Fair-skinned boys who seem delicate and frail."

Cursing, A-Tai complained, "How the hell am I delicate and frail?! I'm a grown man!"

A-Tai was slender and pale, but his abdomen was leanly muscled. Still muttering under his breath, he grumbled that they should have gotten Hongjun for this role.

"Careful Li Jinglong doesn't strangle you," Ashina Adarvan warned. "Now, come on! Let's go!"

With Li Longji out in the city, Xingqing Palace was practically empty of guards. Court officials arrived one after another and gathered in the imperial gardens, where the evening's birthday banquet was to take place. An Lushan, having arrived some time ago, reclined on a couch, laughing as he chatted with Geshu Han. He looked nothing like a man who had conspired to murder his conversation partner just last night.

Carrying a eunuch's peacock-green scepter, fashioned from jade, in the crook of his arm, Ashina Adarvan led the way through the gardens toward the pavilion where An Lushan was seated. He handed A-Tai a jar of arkhi liquor and retreated a short distance away. A-Tai tucked a dagger into his waistband at the small of his back, making sure to cover it with his vest. Then he stepped forward and knelt with the arkhi jar cupped in both hands, delivering the drink to one of Geshu Han's officers, who poured it into waiting cups.

The moment Geshu Han took a sip from his cup, his face clouded over. He turned from his conversation with An Lushan and demanded, "Who brought this?!"

The arkhi had gone sour, and Geshu Han was short of temper; he hurled the jar of wine at A-Tai.

In the distance, Ashina Adarvan watched as A-Tai was dragged into the pavilion, his hand shaking on the hilt of his throwing knife.

An Lushan let out a bark of laughter. “Forget it! It’s a day of celebration. Why get worked up over such a trivial matter? General Geshu! Please allow me to beg for leniency on this young man’s behalf!”

A-Tai knelt on the ground, trembling. He was drenched in arkhi, the milky liquor soaking through his vest and pants. The sash draped around his waist clung to his skin, revealing the lean lines of his thighs as thoroughly as if he were completely naked.

“Raise your head,” An Lushan commanded. “What’s your name?”

A-Tai looked up slowly. His blue eyes had been treated with medicine and were now flecked with gold. His skin was fair and fine, and his brows had been specially trimmed for the occasion. Although he already had the broader physique of a man, his youthful looks nevertheless caused An Lushan to exclaim in appreciation.

Geshu Han scoffed in disgust—evidently, he was aware of An Lushan’s proclivities—and pushed to his feet. “I’m going for a walk.”

His subordinates jumped up to follow him.

“Bye now!” An Lushan called out. “Let’s have a drink later this evening!”

Watching Geshu Han’s retreating back, An Lushan’s eyes flashed with resentment, but a moment later, he smiled. Gripping A-Tai’s chin with one fleshy hand, he said, “Are you Semu? How did you get into the palace?”

A-Tai pitched his voice higher, transforming his usually clear timbre into a soft and charming tone. “To celebrate the joyous occasion of the noble consort’s birthday,” he explained, “His Majesty sent us into the palace to make a present…”

A-Tai deliberately stumbled over his words, as if the language were unfamiliar to him. An Lushan was completely focused on the plan he had set into motion at Daci’en Temple. A-Tai was just one person, and a pretty youth at that—within a few sentences, he’d completely lowered his guard. Smiling lazily, he said, “This wine isn’t *that* bad…”

He sauntered over and wrapped a hand around A-Tai’s waist, then leaned down to lick the arkhi off A-Tai’s abdomen with his thick tongue.

A-Tai broke out in gooseflesh; he’d never expected this guy to be so revolting. In the distance, Ashina Adarvan cursed softly, his alarm rising as he watched An Lushan’s groping hand come within an inch of A-Tai’s hidden dagger.

Chapter 115:
The Gu Apes Destroyed

THE MOMENT LI JINGLONG stepped into the array, the Anxi Barracks seemed to dismantle themselves, brick and stone flying into the air before reassembling, a layer at a time, into a towering wall.

Before the wall stood a man. His body emitted raging flames that licked into the sky and dyed the sun black, causing dark prominences to rise from its surface like a solar eclipse.

Li Jinglong stopped in the middle of the open space and gazed at him. This must be the fourth gu ape known as Wrath—Wan Feng. The limp figure of Feng Changqing lay at his feet.

“Do you not feel ashamed, taking an ordinary human hostage?” Li Jinglong asked.

“If I can avenge my brothers’ deaths by making you watch as I cut him to pieces, then no, I will feel no shame,” Wan Feng said grimly.

So An Lushan’s faction knew what he had done in Luoyang. In that case, the four gu apes must have some way to communicate across vast distances.

“I see news travels fast,” Li Jinglong remarked.

“Did you really expect me to waste time talking nonsense with you before our fight?” Wan Feng drew his sword. “Watch carefully, Li Jinglong. Today, I’ll—”

“You asked An Lushan—I mean, Lord Mara—to let you wait for me here just so you could avenge your brothers?”

“That’s right!” Wan Feng snarled. He slashed at Feng Changqing, carving a long gash on his arm. Feng Changqing curled in on himself—he’d fallen unconscious after having neither food nor drink since his abduction the night before, but now he let out an agonized groan.

After looking the wounded Feng Changqing up and down, Li Jinglong said blandly, “What makes you think the two of us are on such

good terms?”

Wan Feng was speechless.

“Be my guest.” Li Jinglong gestured at his slumped cousin. “Or would you rather I kill him for you?”

Wan Feng had envisioned all sorts of scenarios, but he never expected Li Jinglong to react like this. Scrambling to gather his composure, he swung again, this time opening a bloody cut on Feng Changqing’s thigh.

Feng Changqing moaned in pain. “Kill me… Kill me…”

Li Jinglong’s mouth curled in a ruthless smile, his eyes still on Wan Feng. “Go on then. I’ve hoped for this day for ages.”

Wan Feng trembled—he couldn’t threaten Li Jinglong with Feng Changqing’s life. Even An Lushan had assumed that since Feng Changqing was Li Jinglong’s cousin, Li Jinglong would…

But while Feng Changqing was indeed the only family Li Jinglong had left, they had all forgotten a crucial piece of information: Based on his handful of encounters with the man, Mergen had warned them that Feng Changqing treated Li Jinglong with undue harshness.

Li Jinglong calmly rolled up his sleeves, gazing at Feng Changqing. “Old bastard, you’re finally getting what you deserve. Do you remember what you said to me when I wanted to reestablish the Department of Exorcism?”

Feng Changqing’s throat clicked as he swallowed. Slowly, his scattered gaze focused on Li Jinglong.

Li Jinglong turned to address Wan Feng, who seemed to be at a loss for what to do. “You’re not continuing? In that case, I have something to say.”

Wan Feng regarded Li Jinglong with wary eyes.

“I came here today to speak with An Lushan,” Li Jinglong said. “To think you would be here instead—but oh well. It won’t make much difference. Tell your boss I came to make peace. You can keep your hostage; just find some place to bury him after you’re done tormenting him. My enemy is Xie Yu, not An Lushan. So long as he agrees to three conditions, the Department of Exorcism will not move against him. First,

help me eliminate Xie Yu. Second, withdraw from Chang'an. And third, help me retrieve Ye Ming's body."

Li Jinglong's reaction left Wan Feng in shock. "Li Jinglong!" he exploded. "You killed my brothers, yet you wish to make peace?!"

Li Jinglong frowned. "Whom did I kill?"

As he spoke, he reached into his lapels and pulled out a glass bottle containing a black insect—the queen he'd caught in Luoyang.

Wan Feng was stunned.

Upon returning from Luoyang, Li Jinglong had consulted the carp yao about the origin of the four gu apes. These creatures were an extremely rare type of yao. In a previous lifetime, they had been apes, the animals closest to humans in terms of intelligence. After practicing cultivation deep in the mountains for many years, they became reluctant to resign themselves to death. When the end of their lives came, they dragged their ailing bodies along, allowing venomous insects to feast on their flesh until they were fully parasitized and thus transformed into yao through a unique process.

"So they're basically parasites, like caterpillar fungus," Li Jinglong had mused.

The carp yao had considered this for a moment and realized it was true. Were four strands of caterpillar fungus really that scary? Regardless, these parasites must have embedded their own insects within each others' swarms as a means of communication. In other words, when a swarm was destroyed, the other three could sense it.

This had merely been Li Jinglong's conjecture, but as he held the glass bottle up before Wan Feng, he had already grasped the key points of the situation.

"You can have this one back now. As for the other, I'll trade it for Ye Ming's corpse."

The glass bottle arced through the air. Wan Feng lunged, but it was too late. The bottle hit the ground and shattered.

"Dage!" Wan Feng cried as the queen buzzed into the air.

Wan Feng rushed forward to catch the queen. The moment he stepped onto the mess of powdered glass, Li Jinglong quietly arched a brow.

With a soft hiss, the glass scattered like a cluster of stars. Before Wan Feng could react, Li Jinglong pinched his fingers together, casting a spell. The fragments whirled into the air and spun around Wan Feng at top speed.

“You fool,” Li Jinglong sneered.

Wan Feng roared furiously; the queen slipped between his fingers and flew away. He dispersed into a cloud of black insects as he tried to escape, but Li Jinglong was already darting forward. He formed a hand seal and pushed outward, light bursting from his palms.

As the swarm of venomous insects soared skyward and scattered among the motes of glass floating through the air, blinding radiance arced from Li Jinglong’s fingertips. The light of the heart lamp struck the glass and refracted in all directions, entrapping the swarm within an enormous ball of light.

The insects were whipped into a panic by the power of the heart lamp. Locked in a cage with nowhere to escape, they crashed against their gleaming confines. Concentrating the heart lamp’s light, Li Jinglong shouted, “Obliterate!”

A second eruption went off as the swirling particles of glass exploded, incinerating the swarm of venomous insects with a deafening *boom*. Wan Feng gave one final, agonized scream as demonic energy burst from his body in a dark cloud that collided with Li Jinglong, sending him flying. Li Jinglong somersaulted in midair and landed hard on his feet, skidding several yards back from the force of the blow.

The queen disintegrated in a puff of mist. Only then did Li Jinglong tear off his outer robe and rush over to Feng Changqing.

“Cousin!” Li Jinglong called anxiously as he hurried to apply medicine to Feng Changqing’s wounds, bandaging them with strips of cloth torn from his robe.

Feng Changqing’s face was pale as joss paper. Li Jinglong hauled him up onto his back, then drew a sigil in the air and stepped out of the Anxi Barracks.

“Long live Your Majesty!”

Li Longji had been exposed to the blazing sun so long he had become dizzy. He had no choice but to admit he was getting on in years. His body had become weaker. The powder on his face could conceal his liver spots, but it couldn’t hide his exhaustion.

Yang Yuhuan was also about to expire from the heat. It would take at least another hour for the crowd to finish paying their respects. Her greater concern, however, was that Li Longji would faint from heat stroke—he’d been receiving court officials and pacifying foreign emissaries for days, subsisting on only a handful of hours of sleep each night.

Many of the citizens below the dais were hungry and thirsty. Despite their exhaustion, they forced themselves to keep shouting, “Long Live Your Majesty!” It wasn’t easy being the emperor either; although he had an umbrella to shade him from the worst of the sun’s glare, he had been sitting motionless in the heat for over four hours.

Only half the crowd had expressed their well-wishes. Yang Yuhuan felt the back of her neck prickle, but she couldn’t reach up to scratch it. She distracted herself by counting the people below with her face frozen in a smile, on the verge of collapse.

The Minister of Rites sang, “The Foreign Merchants’ Guild pays their respects to His Majesty the emperor of Great Tang and to his noble consort—”

Qiu Yongsi pulled out a box and flicked open the golden latch.

Up above, Hongjun crouched atop Daci’en Temple, hiding behind the crest of the roof. He tilted his throwing knives to catch the sunlight, reflecting its glare to the east and west. Leaning against a rafter, Li Bai angled his sword in an answering flash. Meanwhile, Li Guinian gently plucked a string on his pipa, issuing a low note.

Yang Guozhong’s ears twitched at the sound, and his brows drew slightly together.

“May the wise Son of Heaven bless Great Tang and all the nations that have come to pay tribute, his power spreading across the land—” A

representative of the foreign merchants was carefully reading from a length of silk when a blast of wind swept by, lifting a volley of sand and stone from the ground.

As everyone flinched to avoid being struck, a voice shook the firmament, echoing throughout Chang'an.

"Citizens of Great Tang—"

It was the stern voice of a woman. She wore the emperor's twelve-chained crown and imperial robes with sleeves so expansive they seemed as if they could catch the sun and moon and hold heaven and earth. A middle-aged Wu Zhao descended from the sky, her loose hair whipping in the wind.

Shouts rose from the crowd. Shocked, Li Longji bellowed, "Who are you—who are you?!"

"Can you not even recognize your own ancestors?" Wu Zhao asked coldly. A deathly silence had fallen over the square. "Unfilial grandson! You've long forgotten the teachings of your ancestors!"

Darkness spotted Li Longji's vision. One thought reverberated through his mind: *It's over…*

Yang Yuhuan nearly fainted from fright. It wasn't as if she'd never heard Li Longji mention Wu Zhao, but to think that the woman's spirit would manifest like this before such a crowd!

Yang Guozhong's sleeves flicked, and an hourglass appeared in his hands.

Standing amid the crowd, Qiu Yongsi snapped open the box, and a swarm of blue insects crackling with lightning rose into the air.

The specter of Wu Zhao failed to notice. Robes billowing, she bore down on the dais, calling furiously, "Li Longji, my disobedient grandson! Do you still refuse to repent?! Soldiers of my great nation, heed my orders!"

Li Longji had turned deathly pale, his eyes round and wide. Between the overwhelming heat, his accumulated fatigue, and the flash of fury that jolted through his heart, he promptly fainted, his eyes still open.

"Kill the treacherous concubine and chancellor!" Wu Zhao roared. "Purge the ranks of the emperor's sycophants! Restore our lost nation!"

The common people and the imperial guard had long resented the Yang family; the bygone empress's cry was immediately taken up by members of the crowd. "Kill the treacherous concubine and chancellor!"

Yang Yuhuan's beautiful face paled as the shouts swelled. "This is a demon!" Yang Guozhong shouted. "That's not the late empress!"

The imperial guard had been oppressed by the Yang family for years. Now, after the hours they had spent standing in the blistering sun for the sake of the emperor's favored concubine, their discontent reached a boiling point.

A new shout rang out from the crowd: "Kill Yang Guozhong!"

Hu Sheng's face turned grim as he barked, "Are you trying to start a revolt?!"

It was difficult to tell if there was one instigator or many. There was already no way for the imperial guard to fend off the jostling crowd. Several guards shoved the people back, only to throw off their helmets and turn on the dais themselves, their hair in wild disarray as they joined the citizenry in trying to drag the Yang family members down and take their payment in blood.

"This is an order from the former ruler of Great Tang," Wu Zhao said sternly. "What are you waiting for?!"

Suddenly, the clear voice of a young man cut through the clamor. "Shameless scoundrel! How dare you impersonate the late empress! The Department of Demonic Exorcism is here on official business! Demon—"

A sword glare swept over Daci'en Temple, tearing glazed tiles from the roof and lifting them high into the air, like a pathway to the heavens. Flipping down from his perch, Hongjun raced across the bridge of broken tiles, his steps light as a dragonfly skimming water. His four throwing knives merged in his hands.

"*—begone!*"

Gripping his sword, Li Bai laughed brightly and slid down the rooftop with Li Guinian in tow. Li Guinian's hand flicked again, and his pipa emitted a resonant note that transformed into a blast of energy and crashed into the charging crowd, sending the mob flying.

Hongjun swung his saber down in a bright arc as Wu Zhao roared, “Insolence!”

The empress expelled a burst of demonic energy to block the strike, but the saber didn’t even slow. It tore through her body like paper, eliciting horrified screams from the crowd below. As Wu Zhao soared higher into the air, gathering the pieces of herself, Hongjun split his saber back into throwing knives, the blades leaving crisscrossing trails of light as they hurtled after their target.

Down below, Li Bai and Li Guinian had reached Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan. Li Bai tipped his head back and swallowed a mouthful of wine. His sword sliced through the air, skewering a number of the emperor’s attackers on the spot, who fell back with a chorus of pained cries.

Li Guinian strummed his pipa to the resounding tune of “The Dance of the Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Robe.”

High on the thrill of battle, Li Bai flashed over the dais like a banished immortal as he danced with his sword, the tip of his blade glittering like a shooting star. The next swing of his arm dispatched the rest of the insurgent guards surrounding the emperor. He bent to pick up a piece of loose tile and hurled it skyward with all his might. “Go!”

Hongjun had just begun to fall when Li Bai’s fresh barrage of tiles hurtled his way. He bounded off one after another, climbing higher and higher. Hanging in midair, he flung out his throwing knives, dismembering Wu Zhao once again before she could recover.

Enraged, Wu Zhao merged back into one and lunged at Hongjun, only to find herself blocked by his pentacolor sacred light. She flicked her sleeves in frustration, conjuring a mountain of riches that pelted toward Hongjun.

The heavens filled with golden light as treasure rained from the sky, drowning Hongjun in a sea of gold leaf, silver flakes, copper coins, jade, pearls, tortoiseshell ornaments, and other baubles.

This was the gu ape Greed. Li Jinglong and Qiu Yongsi had discussed possible countermeasures against him while planning the mission. The four yao known as Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath all employed spiritual techniques that muddled the mind. The sight of such riches would have

caused an ordinary mortal to immediately lose his focus. Hongjun, however, had been using pearls and white jade as marbles since he was a child. The sight of so much treasure only made him more annoyed—which was precisely the outcome Li Jinglong had been aiming for.

Facing that sea of wealth, Hongjun shoved out his pentacolor sacred light, repelling the torrent of treasure.

When the exorcists had first encountered the four cardinal vices, they'd had no idea what they were capable of and had lost the upper hand. Now, with his newfound familiarity with the creatures and Li Jinglong's plan firmly in mind, Hongjun felt no fear as he faced off against his opponent. Money and precious stones pattered into the crowd as Wu Zhao's mountain of treasure spun up around her in a glittering cage under the force of Hongjun's spiritual barrier, coins and gems reflecting the glow of the sacred light.

Now that the sky was raining money, the mob forgot all about Noble Consort Yang as they scrambled to collect what they could. The corner of Yang Guozhong's mouth twitched, but he held himself back from making any moves, intent on seeing how the exorcists planned on cleaning up this mess.

Li Guinian struck a new chord, and the air filled with the opening notes of "The Song of Tranquility."

The melody seemed to have a hypnotic effect. As it played, the commotion below the dais faded. The carp yao seized his moment—he leapt into the air, stepping over shattered tiles as he wove through the crowd with an enormous bag of oblivion pollen in his arms and two more strapped to his back. Pouring his heart and soul into his task, he tossed pollen this way and that like a celestial maiden scattering flower petals from the heavens.

"Memories, begone—! The past is but a dream—!"

Sneezes spread through the mob like wildfire. The common people blinked and looked down curiously at the valuables clutched in their hands.

As "The Song of Tranquility" hit its middle strains, Li Longji startled awake and stared at the sight before him in a daze.

"Your Majesty?!"

“Your Majesty!”

Noble Consort Yang clutched Li Longji’s hand; Li Longji pressed a reassuring palm to the back of hers in return.

Wu Zhao’s hair tangled in the wind as her face twisted into that of a snarling ape. Hongjun launched himself off another piece of tile, soaring higher. He called back his throwing knives and shouted, “Break!”

The blades shot out, crackling with lightning as they streaked across the sky. Realizing his plan had failed and that there was nowhere to hide, the gu ape Wan Bao dispersed with a bang into a swarm of venomous insects, beating against the inside of the cage.

Below, Qiu Yongsi murmured an incantation, then raised both palms toward the sky. “Rise!”

The sparking blue insects soared up to merge with the cage of treasure; with a flash like lightning forking across the sky, the cage exploded.

The blast sent Hongjun flying backward. Li Bai flung his scabbard into the air with a shout. “Look out!”

Flipping in midair, Hongjun kicked off the scabbard and dove for the dais where Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan were seated. The carp yao had already darted forward and was about to throw a handful of oblivion pollen into the imperial couple’s faces when Hongjun waved a hand to call him off.

Above them, the venomous swarm—charred to a crisp by the electricity—scattered across the sky.

Hongjun touched down on the dais and bowed to Li Longji as Li Guinian’s song drew to a close. A hush fell over the square.

“Thank you, Master Li Guinian and Taibai-xiong, for your performance.” Hongjun smiled as he turned to face the crowd below, sweeping forward in another low bow. The three of them turned back to greet Noble Consort Yang together.

“I wish you long life and good health,” Li Bai said.

“May you have a happy birthday,” Li Guinian added.

“And many happy returns,” Hongjun concluded with a smile.

Li Longji, Noble Consort Yang, and Yang Guozhong stared in stunned silence as the three quickly descended the dais, the carp yao scampering at their heels. The crowd broke into thunderous applause. Something amazing seemed to have happened just now—Li Bai had performed a sword dance accompanied by Li Guinian’s music, a once-in-a-lifetime sight. And somehow, their hands were filled with money and treasure. This was surely a grand spectacle organized by the emperor himself. The sound of Master Li Guinian’s pipa was so breathtakingly lovely it was simply…intoxicating.

Chapter 116:
The Power of Dreams

IN A PAVILION within the imperial gardens, An Lushan had A-Tai locked in his fleshy embrace. Twisting aside, A-Tai pretended to reach for An Lushan's enormous hand as he made a grab for the dagger in his waistband.

Outside, Ashina Adarvan's heart was hammering in his chest. Out of all the teams' missions, theirs was by far the most dangerous—facing the heavenly demon alone would be an incredibly difficult feat—but as long as A-Tai could seize An Lushan's ring, they stood a chance of defeating him.

"Y-Your Excellency…" A-Tai stuttered. "You… There are people watching…"

An Lushan chuckled as he dragged A-Tai over to a couch, then shoved him down and leaned in to lick a long stripe up his chest. A-Tai's outfit wasn't nearly as revealing as the clothing worn by Hu women. In addition to his bare arms, it left only the fair skin of his lean chest and well-defined abdomen on display—but it just so happened that these were An Lushan's two favorite places to lick boys. Although A-Tai was already a mature young man, his delicate appearance stirred An Lushan into a frenzy. He couldn't resist pawing at A-Tai on the spot.

In the split second before An Lushan pinned him to the couch, A-Tai unsheathed the dagger and buried his hand beneath a pillow. He was trembling with nerves. As he looked up at An Lushan looming over him, the general happened to glance down and spot the fear in his eyes.

Alert at once, An Lushan demanded, "Who are you?!"

Before the guards could turn their heads, A-Tai gritted his teeth and swung his dagger at An Lushan's chest. An Lushan had already realized he'd been duped—quick as lightning, he caught the dagger in one hand and seized A-Tai's neck with the other, holding him in a vise grip that nearly crushed his throat.

"Assassin!" he shouted.

The guards swarmed toward the pavilion. A-Tai let out a strangled cry. An Lushan whooped like a wild beast as he pried the dagger from A-Tai's shaking fingers and raised the blade overhead. As the dagger plunged toward him, the corner of A-Tai's mouth curved subtly upward.

Behind An Lushan, Ashina Adarvan twitched his fingers in a gentle rippling motion, twirling his razor-sharp throwing knife over his knuckles. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he sent it spinning through the air.

A gust of wind whipped past, scattering flower petals through the imperial gardens.

An Lushan started in surprise as he registered A-Tai's expression, but it was too late; the throwing knife was already a silver arc shooting toward him. The blade swept past his raised hand and embedded itself in a pillar. Blood spurted from An Lushan's thumb as the severed digit flew into the distance—along with the ring adorning it.

An Lushan howled in agony, releasing A-Tai's throat as he scrabbled for his thumb ring with his intact hand. Ashina Adarvan threw a second throwing knife, knocking the ring and the bloody digit attached to it onto a different trajectory with a metallic *clink*.

This was the moment A-Tai had been waiting for. Jumping to his feet, he yanked the first throwing knife from the pillar and hurled it directly into An Lushan's right eye. As An Lushan roared in fury, he snatched the thumb out of the air.

Ashina Adarvan shouted in Persian as A-Tai's fingers closed around raw meat and metal. Everything had happened in a matter of seconds; by the time the guards burst into the pavilion, Ashina Adarvan was tossing out a third projectile. Fearing Ashina Adarvan's knives, the guards hurried to protect An Lushan while A-Tai leapt onto the wooden frame of the couch.

What he threw was not a knife, however, but the jade-green scepter. It sailed over An Lushan's head and into A-Tai's waiting hand.

A-Tai shook out the scepter, which transformed into his cyclone fan. With a cool smirk, he summoned his spiritual power and waved his fan toward the men rushing toward him. A furious gale roared through the imperial gardens, tearing bricks and tiles from their foundations as it swept the guards out of the pavilion.

“Let’s go!” A-Tai called. He and Ashina Adarvan bounded out of the gardens, An Lushan’s agonized wails echoing in their wake.

A-Tai glanced over his shoulder as they reached an alleyway just beyond the outer limits of the Imperial City. “He didn’t chase us—what do we do?”

Ashina Adarvan was equally at a loss. “Maybe he can’t keep up because he’s too fat?”

“Don’t tell me this is a fake…” Struck with horror at the thought, A-Tai threw away the severed length of An Lushan’s thumb and bent to examine the bloodstained ring.

In the next moment, an explosion rocked the Imperial City. Dark clouds roiled over the palace walls, coalescing into a monstrous head. The apparition opened its mouth in a ferocious roar and rushed in their direction.

“It’s real! Run!” Ashina Adarvan yelped.

Sucking in a breath, A-Tai promptly turned tail and sprinted after Ashina Adarvan.

In the brick alleyway, Mergen and Lu Xu summoned all their skills to fight beneath the scorching sun. Their bodies, dripping with sweat, blurred into hazy shadows—one black, one white—as they whirled around each other.

Mergen hadn’t expected Lu Xu to be such a difficult opponent. On the basis of strength alone, Lu Xu shouldn’t have lasted ten moves against him—but why would Lu Xu try to compete against Mergen in strength? Instead, he relied on speed, beating Mergen back with a flurry of swift attacks.

Within the Department of Exorcism, Mergen was fastest when it came to drawing a bow, even more agile than Li Jinglong, but he found himself struggling to execute even his quickest moves against Lu Xu. Every time he flung out a hand, Lu Xu beat him to the punch. When Mergen was too slow to dodge, he suffered a crisp slap to the face. While he fumed, Lu Xu would dance out of reach, a smile in his eyes even as he panted for breath.

“Bastard!” Mergen howled as he charged. Bounding up onto the wall beside them, Lu Xu took off down the alley with Mergen hot on his heels.

“Too slow!” Lu Xu called back.

“How much longer can you keep this up?” Mergen retorted.

Lu Xu was well aware he couldn’t maintain this pace for long; already he was beginning to tire. Mergen knew it too—he redoubled his efforts and just barely managed to catch up.

Kicking off the wall, Lu Xu somersaulted over Mergen, using his falling momentum to chop down on the back of Mergen’s neck. Had the blow connected, it would have knocked Mergen out cold—but Mergen sensed Lu Xu wanted to settle things quickly. He was prepared for this shift in tactics. Mergen clamped a hand around Lu Xu’s wrist and spun, flinging him across the alley.

Caught off guard, Lu Xu hurtled toward the wall. For a moment, he thought he was going to spit up blood again. Instead, he smashed through the second-floor window of a family residence with a thunderous crash.

Mergen leapt after him, springing toward the window like an arrow leaving the string.

Lu Xu was winded from the crash, but he was still quick to react; in an instant, he’d regained his balance. He flipped in midair before kicking off the ground in the opposite direction, swerving aside as he swept his leg out in a roundhouse kick.

The moment Mergen charged in, Lu Xu’s foot connected with his chest, sending him crashing into a folding screen. The screen collapsed on top of him, leaving his body littered with debris and his face smeared with blood. He lay there gasping, so angry he could only laugh. “It’s been ages since I’ve fought like this.”

“Who taught you how to fight?” Lu Xu was short of breath as well as he approached Mergen.

“I taught myself,” Mergen said coldly. He slammed his back into the floorboards with a *thud* that jolted the shattered glass, broken porcelain, and splintered wood into the air. With a spinning kick, he sent the shards hurtling toward Lu Xu.

“Doesn’t—look—like it—” Lu Xu ducked and bounded two steps back before twisting through the air, easily evading the flying debris. Mergen lunged forward to engage him with a series of punches and palm strikes, but Lu Xu merely somersaulted past him once again. This time, Mergen stepped forward to meet him as he hung upside down in midair. As their faces drew close, Lu Xu pressed a soft kiss to Mergen’s mouth, like a dragonfly skimming over water.

The moment their lips met, a burst of images flashed through Mergen’s mind—

An injured Mergen lay in the deepest reaches of a cave as a glowing white stag dipped its head, pressing its nose to his lips.

A young Mergen stood in a natural spring fringed with forest, cleaning his wounds. He washed blood from his body while the stag watched him quietly from the water’s edge.

On the night of the full moon, a gray wolf led his pack to howl at the sky while a silent white deer stood watch atop a mountain peak.

Their lips parted. As Lu Xu sailed over Mergen’s head, he drew his hand back and struck him sharply across the face.

“You!” Mergen snarled.

Lu Xu flipped past him as Mergen swung at him from the right and then left. Tilting his head, Lu Xu blocked the first strike but failed to dodge the second; Mergen’s palm landed firmly on his cheek in a crisp slap.

Lu Xu was speechless.

“You owe me one more!” Mergen growled, pressing his advantage.

Lu Xu fought back with the force of a tempest. “That was punishment for kidnapping Feng Changqing!”

“Well, I’m still going to kill him!”

“There are so many people you want to kill. Killing innocents is a nasty habit, Morning Star,” Lu Xu said, his voice cool. He blocked another strike, using Mergen’s momentum against him to fling him aside. Taking a quick step back, he ducked out a window, then kicked a chunk of wood from the frame at Mergen.

“That’s how the world works!” Mergen knocked the wood aside, crushing it to dust underfoot before following Lu Xu out the window.

“That was a war!” Lu Xu countered sharply. “Seeking vengeance for wrongs done during war—how long will you pursue this?!”

“It was a massacre!” Mergen roared.

Lu Xu was beginning to flag. He panted as he blocked Mergen’s next punch, only for Mergen to send him flying back into the building with a kick to the chest. Landing hard on the stairs, Lu Xu gasped, “Set yourself free. Life is a transient state—”

“No,” Mergen said coldly as he darted forward, his lean figure leaping up and twisting as he brought his elbow down on Lu Xu with the full weight of his body behind it.

Gripping the banister, Lu Xu contorted his body into a near-impossible position to slip past Mergen, narrowly avoiding the crushing blow. He pivoted and charged into Mergen from behind, crashing into his back. “Stay down!”

With a loud *crack*, the wooden staircase collapsed beneath them, sending Mergen and Lu Xu tumbling down to the first floor. They landed with a splash—as it turned out, the lower floor of the building was a bathhouse containing an enormous, gently steaming pool.

Today all the houses in Chang’an were empty; everyone had gone to Daci’en Temple to see the emperor. Hot water streamed in all directions, flooding the bathhouse as the scent of honey locust, rose, and spices rose into the air. Mergen crashed into Lu Xu. They both choked on several mouthfuls of water, their wet clothes plastered to their skin. Lu Xu lunged toward Mergen, sending up a spray of water, but Mergen deftly tripped him, sending Lu Xu back beneath the surface of the pool.

As Lu Xu tried to stagger to his feet, Mergen grabbed his head and shoved him back underwater. Bubbles streamed from Lu Xu’s mouth as he sank to the bottom of the pool. Lungs screaming, he grabbed Mergen around the waist and attempted to dislodge him using a wrestling technique from the territories beyond the Great Wall known as the Horse-Killing Throw. The move involved throwing one’s opponent to the ground and locking their joints to prevent them from rising to their feet. It usually

inflicted little damage—but executed in the middle of the bath, it dragged both Lu Xu and Mergen underwater.

Mergen put up a fierce struggle, but Lu Xu clung tightly to his back, locking him in place. Together they sank through the steaming water to the bottom of the pool. Their surroundings seemed to undergo a strange transformation—a thousand silken strands of energy radiated from Lu Xu's body and pushed their way into Mergen's chest.

This was the power of dreams, possessed only by the white deer.

Abruptly, Mergen realized what had happened. When they had fought earlier, Lu Xu had unleashed a barrage of nonstop attacks, allowing his spiritual power to slowly spread out in a thousand threads until Mergen was wrapped up in them like a puppet on a string. With Lu Xu's power linked to his meridians, all the spiritual energy in Mergen's body began to stream toward Lu Xu's hands, which were folded over Mergen's heart as Lu Xu held him tightly from behind.

There was a soft hum as an incandescent beam of white light flashed through the bathhouse, then all went silent.

The pair drifted limply toward the pool's surface as, under the water, Lu Xu reeled them into a vast dreamscape.

Beneath the shadow of a frontier fortress, Mergen perched on one knee. "I grant you the warmth of the day," he said, lifting his hand from Lu Xu's brow. Lu Xu stilled, meeting Mergen's eyes in silence.

Yet in the next moment, Mergen started in surprise as Lu Xu threw his arms around his neck and shouted, "You actually remembered?!"

Flustered, Mergen stuttered, "What? What did you say?"

Lu Xu ignored his question and clung tighter. "I grant you the peace of the night," he murmured into Mergen's ear.

Their figures gleamed white before dispersing into countless motes of radiance, disappearing in the snowy winter night.

Deep in the mountains beyond Jiayu Pass, Mergen and Lu Xu hid in the underbrush, watching a bear lumbering in the distance.

"Shhh," Mergen cautioned as he got down on one knee. "Don't speak."

Kneeling behind Mergen, Lu Xu reached out and wrapped his arms around Mergen's waist, pressing his cheek to Mergen's back.

"I can't draw my bow if you cling to me like this," Mergen said.

The trees rustled.

"See, it ran away," Mergen said. "Now tell me what we're going to eat for dinner."

Lu Xu laughed.

Mergen led the way as they descended Mount Tiantai. Lu Xu trailed behind, bored and distracted.

"I come here often to hunt," Mergen explained. "What do you think?"

"To be honest, it's kind of boring," Lu Xu said absently.

"Fine," Mergen said, exasperated. "Where do you want to go then?"

Lu Xu motioned for him to keep walking. Mergen couldn't help but feel discouraged—that is, until they reached the bottom of the valley and Lu Xu exclaimed in wonder. This was the fountainhead of the Jialing River. A waterfall tumbled into a clear green pool that reflected the sunlight like a polished gemstone.

They stripped out of their clothes and waded into the water. Mergen led Lu Xu to the center of the pool. Lu Xu didn't know how to swim. Feeling his hands trembling from nerves, Mergen said, "Slowly, slowly. Don't be afraid, I won't let go."

They bobbed in the water. Lu Xu paddled a few times, splashing Mergen in the face. Mergen burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" Lu Xu asked.

"You look like a dog."

Lu Xu wanted to smack him, but the instant he stopped moving his arms, he sank and nearly choked. Mergen hastily looped an arm around his waist and paddled them back to shore. Lu Xu couldn't help but feel awkward; he had never been so close to another person like this before, naked skin pressed flush to naked skin. When they came out of the water, they naturally pulled apart.

The scene shifted. The Department of Exorcism was brightly lit as night fell.

Lu Xu tried to manifest his antlers but could only muster a small segment of them. Mergen watched him from a short distance away, his palms gleaming gently as he tried to help heal Lu Xu's wounds. Seeing the pity in Mergen's eyes, Lu Xu turned away, then drove him out, telling him he was going to bed.

Mergen woke in the middle of the night to find his surroundings emitting a soft glow. The entire Department of Exorcism was filled with glimmers of white light—it was Lu Xu casting his spiritual technique. Every night, he called upon the powers of the white deer to grant his companions a night of sweet dreams.

Padding softly out the door, Mergen spotted him sitting cross-legged in the corridor, his torso bare and his palms glowing faintly as light flickered between his hands.

"Lu Xu?"

Lu Xu snapped his palms together, crushing the light so that it dispersed gently into the night. He seemed embarrassed as he turned to look at Mergen. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"It's chilly out. Careful you don't catch a cold, sitting around half dressed."

Speechless, Lu Xu scrubbed a hand over his brow, then rose and stalked back to his room, pulling the door shut with a *bang*.

Mergen stared after him in confusion.

On the balcony of Lanling Amber, Mergen struggled to get the words out. "I thought the gray wolf and white deer must be… But—"

"Get to the point."

"Hongjun's right. If that…isn't possible, maybe being friends is the best thing."

"Hongjun and I *are* good friends though. What are you overthinking for, you stupid wolf?!"

"I'm talking about you and me."

Silence.

“I always thought the gray wolf and white deer should be husband and wife, so I… I… I’m sorry for being presumptuous. It’s all my fault…”

“Yes, it is. And I’ve never had feelings for you either.”

“Great. I don’t have any improper intentions toward you, Lu Xu.”

“Well, this was completely pointless.”

Later, in a room inside Lanling Amber, Mergen lay quietly on a couch.

Lu Xu pressed his palm gently to Mergen’s brow and whispered, “I grant you the peace of the night.” Then, recalling the incantation Mergen had used to wake him up, Lu Xu pressed a hand to his own forehead and said solemnly, “I grant you the warmth of the day.”

Chapter 117:
Like a Dream

IN THE MEMORY, a younger Mergen lay inside a cave, panting for breath. His body was a tapestry of wounds, new hurts layered over old injuries.

His clothes were tattered beyond repair, the garments of a wild youth who wandered the grasslands and bedded down among beasts. His sun-roughened skin was covered in filth, his hair was a wild tangle, and his weeping wounds had yet to heal.

A glowing stag stepped into the cave, its antlers gleaming with starlight. Mergen lifted his head, his eyes wide with surprise.

The white light converged, and the stag transformed into a naked youth, fair of skin and lean of build, who pressed a finger to his lips for silence. Mergen jumped to his feet, grabbed Lu Xu by the throat, and shoved him to the ground. He exuded the heavy musk of masculinity, like a wolf in rut, howling and snapping its jaws to vent its lust.

Lu Xu gazed calmly into his eyes as Mergen growled fiercely, then sank his teeth into his neck. Instead of struggling, Lu Xu wrapped his arms around Mergen’s broad shoulders even as those sharp canines plunged into his throat, drawing blood. Lu Xu’s scent took on a new sharpness as he grew aroused.

The tantalizingly sweet taste of Lu Xu’s blood filled Mergen’s mouth. He released Lu Xu’s throat, panting harshly. Then, just like the dream from the other night when he’d torn mercilessly into his flesh, he gently mouthed at Lu Xu’s skin, healing the wound in an instant and leaving behind a faint red mark.

Lu Xu clung to his neck, turning to capture Mergen’s lips as Mergen clawed open his belt. He grabbed Lu Xu’s hands from where they were wrapped around his head and pinned them to the cave floor below them. Sucking at Lu Xu’s collarbone, he nuzzled him like the king of wolves before entering him at last with a vicious thrust.

“That’s all of it,” Lu Xu said as he lifted his hand from Mergen’s forehead with a hint of unease.

“Did you use a memory?” Mergen asked with a smile.

“To be honest…I don’t have many precious memories. But ultimately, you wouldn’t be able to tell either way.”

Mergen sat up from the bed in Lanling Amber and yelped—there was a wet patch on his underpants.

Lu Xu awkwardly got to his feet and made his way to the door. “You’ve been pent up too long.”

Cheeks blazing, Mergen scrambled to find a towel to clean himself, shouting after him, “Lu Xu! Lu Xu!”

Outside, Lu Xu sagged against the staircase and panted as he stared down at himself, struggling for composure.

Later, as they left the department headquarters at Lanling Amber, Mergen made a point of asking, “What did you seal into my dreams to act as a guide out of demonhood?”

“Just some ordinary, everyday things,” Lu Xu said.

“It seems like you haven’t had many happy days since you came with me to Chang’an.” Mergen’s tone turned apologetic as he braced himself, pushing the handcart full of wine with a grunt. “Had I known earlier, I would’ve taken you somewhere more fun.”

Lu Xu sat on the edge of the cart with his back to Mergen, his head bowed. His hands glowed as day melted into dusk, sparks of light wheeling over his palms.

“After I saw Hongjun’s dream that day,” Lu Xu said without looking back, “I realized that when you get to know someone, the most important moments all revolve around trivial things. What need is there for all that drama? It’s exhausting.”

Mergen arched one handsome brow as his mouth curved in a wicked smirk. “What if you can’t wake me up?”

“We will,” Lu Xu said. “The chief will come back.”

“I want *you* to wake me up,” Mergen said. “Once you break the seal, I’ll wake up without a doubt.”

Lu Xu couldn’t tell whether Mergen was teasing him or speaking in earnest.

Mergen pushed, and the handcart swayed as it trundled along the stone pavement, jouncing Lu Xu with each roll of the wheels.

“If you can’t wake me up, it’s okay. Just kill me.”

“We’ll wake you up,” Lu Xu repeated. “What’s wrong with you?”

Mergen chuckled self-deprecatingly. Lu Xu continued, “Even if we can’t, we won’t kill you. Worse comes to worst, I’ll slap you a few times—that’ll wake you up.”

“I only get slaps?” Mergen asked.

“What do you want?” Lu Xu asked, deadpan.

Noticing that Lu Xu always kept his back to him when his palms glowed like this, Mergen leaned over and asked curiously, “What kind of spiritual technique is this?”

Lu Xu tucked the light away. “We’re here,” he said, hopping off of the cart and striding ahead.

Mergen’s eyes went wide. After a long moment of thought, he stepped through the gates of the Anxi Barracks. The moment he crossed the threshold, there was an explosive *bang* as his body was engulfed in black flame.

In the dim alleyway, Mergen pressed his hand to the wall and trapped Lu Xu against the length of his body. Lu Xu darted forward and kissed him. Mergen froze, and Lu Xu pulled away with a rustle of fabric.

The scene shifted. A black-clad Mergen stood on one end of the roof with Lu Xu behind him and a full moon hanging in the sky.

“Get lost,” Mergen said coldly. “Stop following me.”

“It’s just murder,” Lu Xu said, his voice low. “I’ll go with you.” Mergen’s eyes widened as Lu Xu continued, “Tomorrow morning, I’ll meet you at the usual spot. Don’t oversleep.”

“Wait! Where?!” Mergen called, but Lu Xu had already leapt down and disappeared into the streets below. Mergen chased him for a few steps, then stopped.

At noon the next day, sunlight streamed into the gloomy alleyway. Mergen paced back and forth, waiting for Lu Xu, but he did not appear. Starting in realization, Mergen took off for the food stall outside the West Market. The place was rowdy with customers, but there was no sign of Lu Xu.

“What took you so long?”

Mergen turned to see Lu Xu holding a paper packet of flatbread—no doubt Mergen’s breakfast.

“I’m going to kill someone today,” Mergen said abruptly.

“Even so, you should have some breakfast, right?” Lu Xu found this man incomprehensible. “What’s wrong with filling your belly before work?”

Mergen reluctantly accepted the flatbread Lu Xu offered him. After sitting down at a table, he broke the bread into pieces and dunked them into a bowl of soup. “I thought you didn’t like the food here,” he groused around a mouthful of mutton.

“I like it now.”

“Why?”

“Because you like it,” Lu Xu said expressionlessly.

Mergen spoke no further. After they finished their breakfast, he said, “I’m going to kill your friend.”

“Go right ahead,” Lu Xu said. “I won’t stop you.”

Mergen scoffed. When they arrived at Daci’en Temple, the streets were already teeming with people. Taking a running leap, Mergen scaled the temple walls, and Lu Xu followed like a shadow.

The two of them arrived at a secluded corner of the Treasure Pavilion, where a pearl-like relic from Great Master Xuanzang’s ashes was enshrined. Mergen pushed open the window and braced his bow on the sill, nocking his six nailhead arrows to the string.

Lu Xu fingered the seventh arrow. “You want this back?”

“These are enough,” Mergen replied.

Hongjun wasn’t there, but Hongjun wasn’t his target. From this angle, he could just make out the dais on the steps of Daci’en Temple, upon which sat a pair of thrones for Li Longji and Noble Consort Yang, awaiting their arrival.

Mergen drew his bow to check his shot. Then, he let down the bow, set one foot against the windowsill, and hunkered down to wait like a wolf eyeing its prey from the shadows. Lu Xu propped his elbows on the sill and looked out into the square as the sun blazed overhead.

“During the Zhenguan era, in Emperor Taizong’s reign,” Mergen began absently, “Khitan chieftain Li Jinzhong rose up in rebellion against Great Tang. The Shiwei Tribal Confederacy was allied with Great Tang then, and a yearslong war broke out. During that time, the Göktürks, Khitan, and other tribes coerced the Arghun tribe into cutting ties with the Tang Dynasty.”

Lu Xu offered no comment, merely listening quietly.

“The war continued, on and off, for over a century.” Mergen looked down to check his bowstring. “The Arghun tribe resided on the banks of Hulun Lake. At one point, its territories were claimed by Great Tang, and it was agreed that all male members of the tribe would join the Tang army to fight the Göktürks when they turned sixteen—but when the Göktürks attacked, I was only six. To preserve their strength, the Tang army withdrew from Arghun territory with no regard for the lives of my people.

“The Göktürks raped the Arghun women and children…and pillaged the village. They liked to capture Shiwei and Khitan children and train them as suicide fighters to serve in the vanguard in their battles against the Tang army. Once taken, these children would never return. To save my life, my mother hid me away, then struck a deal with a Göktürk company commander…”

“What kind of deal?” Lu Xu asked.

“It happened in broad daylight,” Mergen said. “My mother hid me in a pile of clothes under the bed and told me not to come out no matter what.

She was terrified I'd be spotted by the Göktürks. Then, she let that man violate her in our tent, to save me."

Lu Xu fell silent.

"After the Göktürks left, we turned to the Shiwei," Mergen continued. "They came to help us defend our village, but the Tang army arrived right on their heels. The army slaughtered our tribesmen and set fire to the Arghun territories."

"Why?" Lu Xu asked.

"Because an Arghun troop, mustered by the Göktürks, raided Mount Langya and killed twenty-seven Tang soldiers," Mergen said. "The Tang army wanted to avenge their comrades' deaths. Hulun Lake was also a strategically valuable spot, which had been lost and retaken on multiple occasions. The Tang army couldn't hold it, so to prevent the Göktürks from routing their supplies through the area, they razed the settlement. I'll never forget it. My mother sent me out to fetch water. When I turned back, the village was on fire."

Mergen stared out the window in silence. Lu Xu turned to study him under the scorching rays of the sun, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Why are you smiling?" Mergen asked.

"You're very handsome," Lu Xu answered. "But you haven't kissed me yet."

"Don't try to talk me out of killing my target," Mergen said.

"I won't," Lu Xu said. "I'll just stay with you."

"If you try to stop me at the last moment, I'll shoot you dead," Mergen said, a chill creeping into his voice.

"I won't." Lu Xu frowned. "Why are you so paranoid?"

Mergen stared menacingly at Lu Xu for a few heartbeats. Then he lowered his foot and propped his arms on the sill beside Lu Xu, leaning toward him.

Lu Xu closed his eyes as Mergen kissed him with lightly parted lips. His mouth was warm and soft, and their breathing soon grew ragged.

A bell rang in the distance. Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan had arrived.

Mergen and Lu Xu broke apart, gazing into each other's eyes. Mergen was first to look away, turning to glance toward the entrance of Daci'en Temple.

He set his great bow back on the windowsill and pulled a nailhead arrow from his quiver. As he prepared to nock it, Lu Xu said, "If I were to create a new memory for you in your dream—if I changed your dark past into one where we grew up together—would things be different for you?"

"No," Mergen said grimly. "What happened, happened. As far as I'm concerned, no matter how my memories change, that would stay the same."

"But as far as *I'm* concerned, suffering exists only in memories. It's the duty of the gray wolf and the white deer to drive away the painful nightmares and leave behind only beautiful dreams."

"Isn't that a lie you tell yourself? You're just deceiving people," Mergen said.

"Between dream and reality—where does the boundary lie?" Lu Xu asked. "Or perhaps I should say, how can you be certain those painful memories aren't fabrications created by the heavenly demon for the purpose of corrupting you?"

Mergen was silent.

"Suppose we're in a dream now," Lu Xu continued. "How can you be sure which memories are dreams and which are reality? One last question. What if I told you that before I sealed your memories, the soldiers who massacred your tribe were the Göktürks, and that it was only after An Lushan tampered with your mind that they became soldiers of the Tang army?"

Mergen did not respond, as if he hadn't heard. He slowly drew his bow, sighting the back of Li Longji's distant figure down the shaft of his arrow. The instant the arrow left the string, it would leap across the hundred steps between them and plunge into the emperor of Great Tang's neck, killing him instantaneously.

The abbot led a dozen or so senior monks out of the temple, his wooden fish in hand, ready to chant scripture and pray for the emperor and noble consort.

“Namo ratnatrayaya—”

“Namo aryavalokitesvaraya—”[2]

As the thousand temple monks raised their voices, the words of the sutra seemed to penetrate everyone’s eardrums. Mergen’s chest reverberated with the sound as countless scenes flashed through his mind.

Suffering exists only in memories…

Between dream and reality—where does the boundary lie?

Mergen turned to stare at Lu Xu in disbelief. Standing in the sunlight streaming through the window, Lu Xu met his gaze in silence. For a moment, it was as if they were once again standing quietly beside the fountain within *The Jataka of the Deer King*.

With a soft thrum, the seal of the deer king appeared on Mergen’s chest.

“That which is conditioned is like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow…” Mergen murmured.

Lu Xu smiled. “Like a drop of dew or a flash of lightning, and should be regarded as such.”[3]

Mergen lowered his bow, hit by a wave of dizziness.

Rain fell over Hulun Lake. A stag stood in the very center of the water, the surface around him blooming outward in a million ripples, like a shining lotus flower blossoming and withering without end.

A gray wolf stood on the shore, gazing at the stag from a distance.

“I have to go. I’ll reincarnate in the Mogao Caves,” the stag said, low and gentle, as it turned away.

“I’ll reincarnate on the shores of this lake,” the gray wolf responded, its voice hoarse.

“Remember to come find…” the stag began, then faltered. “Forget it. Let us leave it to fate.”

“I will,” the gray wolf promised.

The stag stepped into the air. The rain had stopped, and the Milky Way appeared, its stars strewn in a wide band across the sky. The stag

followed the gleaming path of the silver river and galloped toward the distant horizon.

Hulun Lake was as still as a mirror, reflecting the earth and sky as the glowing, indigo manifestation of the gray wolf's soul scattered into glimmers of light that slowly dispersed, carried by the wind.

Deep in the night, Mergen pushed open his paper-screen door and emerged bare-chested, wearing nothing but a pair of underpants. Lu Xu sat cross-legged in the corridor, a thoughtful expression on his face as he passed a pair of glowing spheres between his hands.

Mergen glanced down and saw that the balls of light were actually a snow-white fawn and an indigo-blue wolf pup. The wolf pup chased the fawn over to Lu Xu's right hand, and the white fawn bounded over to Lu Xu's left. They chased each other back and forth across Lu Xu's palms, never stopping.

Mergen settled down next to Lu Xu and slung an arm over his shoulders. As Lu Xu gazed up at the starry sky, Mergen turned to study him instead.

"I love you," Mergen said softly.

"Don't be gross," Lu Xu said coldly.

In the bathhouse, Mergen's eyes flew open. He flung Lu Xu off of his back with a furious roar, breaking through the surface of the water. Lu Xu was deathly pale; after being submerged so long, he had run out of air. Mergen hauled him to the edge of the pool, where he pinched Lu Xu's nose shut, blew breath into his mouth, and began to push down on his chest.

He repeated his motions once, then twice, until Lu Xu hacked up a mouthful of water with a shuddering gasp. Mergen waited as he coughed violently, then leaned back over him.

"Mmph—" Struggling under Mergen's weight, Lu Xu tried to push him away—he had already recovered his breath—but rather than giving him air, Mergen kissed him hard, shoving his tongue into Lu Xu's mouth.

Lu Xu's eyes went wide in shock. This time, it was Mergen who closed his eyes as he kissed Lu Xu with total focus. He opened them a few

seconds later, sensing that they had both become aroused. His eyes gleamed with a faint smile as he devoured Lu Xu's mouth.

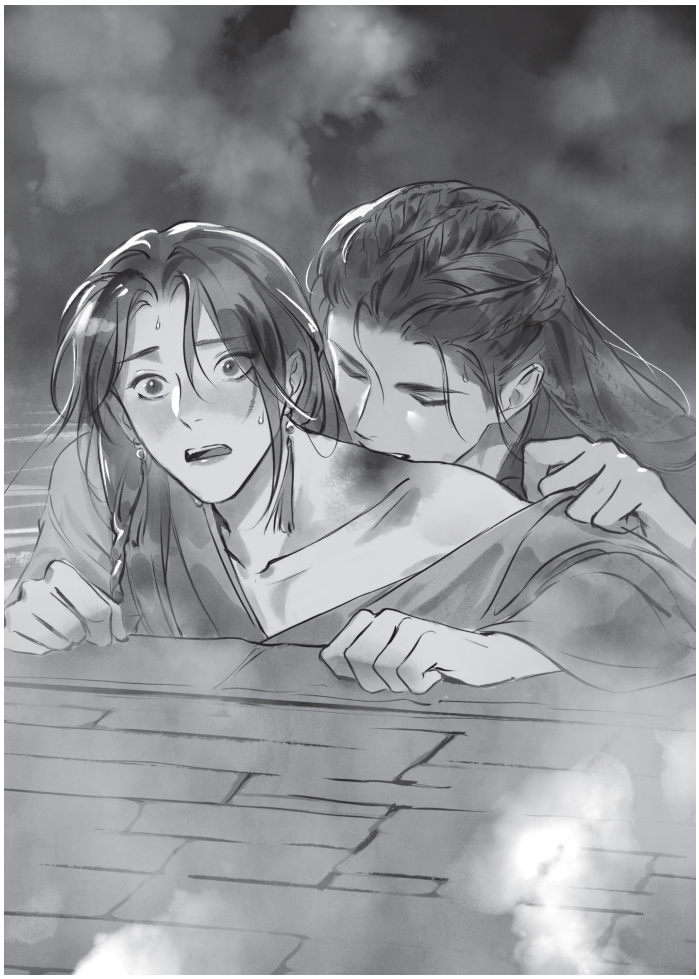
Spotting the flash of wickedness in Mergen's gaze, Lu Xu froze, his heart rabbiting in his chest—had the demonic energy in Mergen not been fully dispelled?

He slammed his elbow into Mergen's chest, knocking him aside. Caught off guard, Mergen snarled, "Do you want to die?!"

Shit! The demonic energy is still there! This wasn't what they'd planned. Moving on instinct, Lu Xu staggered to his feet—he had to find Li Jinglong.

Lu Xu jumped back into the water, wading toward the door. Mergen splashed in after him. Before Lu Xu could reach the other side, Mergen caught him by the waist. He pinned him against the wall of the pool with a grip that brooked no protest. Lu Xu struggled to break free, only to freeze as Mergen bent and set his teeth to the red mark on his neck.

But rather than biting down hard, Mergen merely nipped him gently with his canines before ghosting his lips over Lu Xu's throat, mapping a line of kisses up to his ear. When he pressed his mouth to Lu Xu's cheek, Lu Xu turned away, his eyes wide with shock.



“It’s my turn now,” Mergen said, voice low. “Relax. Don’t be nervous.”

He grasped Lu Xu’s chin and turned Lu Xu to face him, then kissed him again. “You don’t like it rough?” Mergen asked.

“The demonic energy must still be—this isn’t right…”

“No—this is who I am. This is the real me.”

“Y-you can’t… Not here… Bastard!” Lu Xu raised his voice.

“What did you call me?” Mergen asked, his voice a soft rumble in Lu Xu’s ear. Their clothes were soaked; the hard lines of their bodies pressed against each other through the thin silk of their summer robes. Lu Xu hadn’t expected Mergen to be so aggressive, yet he found himself irresistibly drawn to the sight of Mergen’s broad chest, strong shoulders, and powerful arms enshrouded in the fragrant steam. Mergen tore open Lu Xu’s combat robes like a wolf, easily taking both of Lu Xu’s wrists in one hand. Helpless to resist, Lu Xu could only surrender.

“The chief said—”

“I’ll be quick,” Mergen said before pressing him firmly against the wall and shoving into him.

Lu Xu cried out, tears springing to his eyes. Hongjun had described it to him, but at the time, Lu Xu couldn’t help but wonder if it was really as painful as he said. Now that he was experiencing it himself, he realized—it really *did* hurt. So, so much!

“Does it hurt?” Mergen froze at the sight of Lu Xu’s tears, looking suddenly lost and nervous. For a moment he once again seemed like the simple and pure Mergen that Lu Xu knew.

“No, no, no!” Lu Xu shook his head in immediate denial. “It doesn’t hurt at all. Big Wolf…” His brows drew together as he squeezed his eyes shut and said in a quavering voice, “I want it.”

He had long forgotten Hongjun’s words, but in that moment, he felt a strange power blending within their bodies—like blood mixing into blood, water into water.

Mergen shoved Lu Xu against the wall until there was no space between their bodies, their breath shuddering out of them as nervousness, joy, excitement, anticipation…all manner of emotions interwove in a tangled snarl. Even without speaking, they could sense the trembling of each other's souls. Mergen took Lu Xu's hand in his own, and they interlaced their fingers in silent understanding. Each thrust brought a fresh wave of tears to Lu Xu's eyes, until he couldn't help but sob aloud.

Mergen kissed his tears away. "Actually I don't think I can make this quick," he murmured, his lips pressed to Lu Xu's ear. "Can you cry harder for me?"

"Bastard!"

Chapter 118:
Luring the Enemy

IN FENG CHANGQING'S ESTATE, Li Jinglong pushed the medicinal pellet that Hongjun had prepared between his cousin's lips. Feng Changqing shoved Li Jinglong away with what little strength he had. "Go…go save His Majesty."

"His Majesty is safe," Li Jinglong said grimly. "We have it all under control, rest assured."

Feng Changqing breathed a sigh of relief and wearily closed his eyes. Li Jinglong hurried out of the estate. He'd just turned toward Daci'en Temple when a shrill whistle came from the north.

He looked up. A black cloud was passing over Xingqing Palace, heading straight for the area beyond the Xuanwu Gate. The dark mass seemed to be chasing something as it roared and roiled, the specter of an army a thousand strong appearing in its depths.

The whistle sounded again in two sharp bursts—one long, one short—an earsplitting call heard by all members of the Department of Exorcism across the city.

Li Jinglong peered into the distance.

Qiu Yongsi, still before Daci'en Temple, immediately left the crowd. Hongjun had been sipping an iced drink made from sour plums with Li Bai and Li Guinian by the roadside when he heard the whistle. With no time to waste, he called "Gotta go!" before dashing out of the alleyway and onto his waiting horse.

Away from the festivities, the streets of Chang'an were deserted. Hongjun spurred his horse to a gallop and met Qiu Yongsi as he charged onto Imperial Street.

"They've got it!" Qiu Yongsi shouted.

"Where's the chief?!" Hongjun shouted back.

“I don’t know! Follow the plan!”

In the bathhouse, Mergen sighed deeply, his body draped over Lu Xu’s. Both of them were trembling from exertion. The silence stretched until it was punctured by a distant whistle.

“Time to get to work,” Lu Xu said, schooling his expression back to seriousness.

Mergen pulled Lu Xu upright, and the two of them waded out of the pool. Mergen grabbed some clothes from the rack nearby, paying no mind to whom the garments belonged, and shook them out for Lu Xu to change into.

They threw on the white underclothes and black silk outer robes before hurrying out the door. Lu Xu whistled for their horses, but Mergen didn’t wait; he crouched down and shifted into wolf form. His coloring seemed to have changed. His usual blue-gray fur had turned black during his undercover mission, but now, though his coat had returned to a dark blue-gray, he sported a ring of white fur below his neck.

“You’ve changed,” Lu Xu said in surprise.

“Does it look good?” the gray wolf rumbled, cocking his head.

Lu Xu climbed onto his back. “Your fur’s gotten thicker.”

“It’s way too hot today.” The gray wolf was dearly tempted to open his mouth and pant, but he resisted the urge—he didn’t want to look like a dog. “Hold on tight.”

The gray wolf darted out with a ripple of sound, loping northward down the street after the black cloud.

Outside the city, Ashina Adarvan and A-Tai whipped their horses into a headlong gallop. The black cloud, trailing less than a hundred steps behind them, had already rolled past the city walls. Ashina Adarvan blew hard on the whistle. “Does this thing even work?!”

“I’m about to go deaf!” A-Tai shouted back.

“Why does this plan feel a little too risky?!”

“You’re bringing this up now?!” A-Tai demanded. “We’ve already taken the ring!”

“Maybe see if we can use it?” Ashina Adarvan suggested.

A-Tai tossed the thumb ring over. There was no way they could wear it; it was so large it could almost serve as a bracelet.

“This is the sacred flame?” Ashina Adarvan turned it over in his hands. “How do we summon it?”

“I don’t know! Forget it! He’s catching up!”

The black cloud rolled toward them, faster and faster. A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan, on horseback, were limited to the official roads, while the roiling mass of demonic energy could ignore the terrain. After they took a few turns, the distance between them shrank rapidly.

“I can see the end of it!” Ashina Adarvan shouted.

They both sighed in relief. The cloud of demonic energy had seemed boundless when it first surged out of Xingqing Palace; the roiling black mist that was An Lushan was more than two acres wide and flashing with bursts of lightning. Now that they knew there was an end to it, it seemed a much more manageable challenge.

This was their first time witnessing the form of a true demon—the dark energy they’d seen swirling around the heart demon at Dunhuang paled in comparison.

“Shit!” Ashina Adarvan yelped. “It’s trying to surround us!”

“Ride toward the mountains!” A-Tai shouted back.

They pushed their horses to their limits and charged upward, toward Daming Palace at the peak.

“This is it! Hurry up!”

“Where’s Yongsi’s array?!”

“It’s hidden! Get down! We’re out of time!”

“What if he doesn’t follow us up here?! How long do I need to stay down?!”

“Until he does!”

“But he might not use whatever spiritual device he has!” Ashina Adarvan howled. “What kind of thing are we even talking about? We’ve never seen it before!”

“Figure it out yourself! In any case, you’re the hero today! No matter what happens, stay put until then!” A-Tai’s anxiety was palpable as he shoved Ashina Adarvan onto the ground and kicked him once for good measure. Then he hurried into the palace’s central courtyard, where he also pressed himself flat to the paving stones.

In the city, Hongjun spotted a familiar figure on Imperial Street as he tore over the pavement on horseback.

“Jinglong!”

Li Jinglong leaned back slightly as Hongjun galloped toward him. In the moment the horse came abreast of him, Hongjun reached out and caught his hand. Li Jinglong swung up into the saddle behind him and grabbed the reins.

“Go!” Li Jinglong squeezed his legs, and the horse lengthened its stride, carrying them off into the distance. Li Jinglong turned to Qiu Yongsi, riding beside them. “The others?”

“Zhao Zilong is still at Daci’en Temple—I don’t know about the rest!”

As they approached the city wall, they saw the north gate wide open. The sentries on duty had all collapsed, their faces blackened by demonic energy. The exorcists’ horses shot through the gates like bolts from a crossbow.

“Lu Xu—” Hongjun began.

“I heard their whistles!” Li Jinglong said. “He’s done it!”

The roiling mass of black energy was faintly visible up ahead. It spread toward Daming Palace, A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan running before it and Li Jinglong and the others hot on its tail. Hongjun glanced around, looking for Mergen and Lu Xu. As he turned back, he suddenly found his face inches from Li Jinglong’s, so close he could feel his breath.

Li Jinglong kissed him quickly on the cheek.

Though they were about to face a grueling battle, Hongjun's heart blossomed with joy.

"Scared?" Li Jinglong asked, voice soft. He took Hongjun's hand in his own, just as he had the day they left Mount Li, returning to Chang'an to launch an assault on the fox yao that had overtaken the city.

Hongjun laced their fingers together. It was surreal. The Department of Exorcism had started out with only six members, yet through Li Jinglong's meticulous planning, they were on the cusp of achieving a goal that had once seemed completely out of their reach.

"The divine kun said…" Hongjun trailed off.

He thought of the divine kun, who had taken his leave outside Chang'an; of Qing Xiong, presently gathering members of the yao race to help them in the fight against the heavenly demon and Xie Yu; of Chong Ming, far away in Yaojin Palace.

None of them had come, so perhaps they wouldn't end things today. In fact, Hongjun had a strong premonition that, between the heavenly demon and Xie Yu, they were still a long way from resolving everything. But the confidence Li Jinglong gave him was a weight on the other side of the scales of fate, filling him with a faint but stubborn hope.

"It doesn't matter what he said. The future is in our hands," Li Jinglong said before spurring their horse even faster.

Another shrill whistle split the air, and a great wolf burst from the wheat fields lining the road, bearing Lu Xu on his back.

The other three cheered.

"Mergen! You're back!" Hongjun cried.

The gray wolf made a rumbling sound in his throat, then threw his head back in a resonant howl.

"Where are they?" Lu Xu shouted.

"Up ahead!" Li Jinglong called back. "Don't get too close! Give them some time! No faster than this!"

With Lu Xu and Mergen's return, the members of the Department of Exorcism were finally all present and accounted for.

THIRTEENTH YEAR OF TIANBAO,
TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF THE FOURTH MONTH.

Incident: Defeat the Heavenly Demon.

Degree of Difficulty: Heaven.

Location: Daming Palace.

Person(s) Involved: An Lushan (Heavenly Demon), Yang Guozhong (Xie Yu).

Case Details: On Noble Consort Yang's birthday, the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month—following the elimination of An Lushan's subordinates, the gu apes Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath—the heavenly demon revealed itself and was lured to Daming Palace. Purify and destroy the heavenly demon in a single blow, while also completing certain relevant secret missions.

Remuneration: A thousand years of peace in the mortal realm.

As the sun began to slip below the horizon, dark clouds gathered atop the mountain above Daming Palace. With a deep rumble, An Lushan's heavyset figure appeared in the courtyard. He resembled nothing less than a fiendish giant, his entire body wreathed in black flame and his eyes radiating a bloodred light. Vegetation wilted in his wake as his deadly aura spread inexorably outward to enshroud the entire palace.

"You seek death!" An Lushan roared.

Daming Palace was as silent as the grave. Two bodies lay in the central courtyard. The first was Ashina Adarvan, sprawled face down and motionless, his body burnt black by flame. The second, a short distance away, belonged to A-Tai; a throwing knife was lodged in his throat. He appeared to be on his last breath, one hand clutching at his bleeding neck while the other was clenched in a white-knuckled fist.

The two seemed to have fought and killed each other over control of the thumb ring. An Lushan burst into raucous laughter. "If Di'erma had been reborn to witness this day, he would surely die again from fury!"

A-Tai convulsed on the ground, the whites of his eyes showing as blood streamed from his neck. An Lushan waved a hand; a dark tendril of demonic energy wrapped around A-Tai and hurled him into a corner of the courtyard. Spasming from the impact, A-Tai loosened his grip, and an antique thumb ring wrought from gold fell from his slack fingers, rolling across the ground to stop at An Lushan's feet.

The demonic energy curled around the ring and deposited it in An Lushan's outstretched palm. His left thumb had already regrown, but this time, he placed the ring on his right hand.

"Why don't I fuse your souls together?" An Lushan raised his hand, ready to shoot out another stream of black energy, when the thumb ring began to glow. Within seconds, the light had blazed into a dazzling radiance, so bright An Lushan could hardly keep his eyes open.

"This…this is… No. No—!"

With a terrified howl, An Lushan tugged at the ring. The moment he touched the metal, it began to burn with a searing heat. White flames licked up from the golden surface, surrounding An Lushan in a vortex of fire.

"You…you…" Realizing he'd been had, An Lushan bellowed, "Who's there? Who else is here?!"

A-Tai removed the throwing knife from the bag of blood attached to his neck. His face was smeared with crimson, but he nevertheless casually smoothed back his curls and rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry, but who's this Di'erma?" he asked as he slid four elemental rings onto his fingers, then flicked open his cyclone fan. "I've never heard of them before. I'm Tigra of the Imperial House of Sasan."

An Lushan turned to stare at A-Tai, stunned.

"Prince Mergen of Arghun, of the Shiwei Tribal Confederation." Mergen's voice rang out as he stepped into the palace courtyard, dressed in black silk robes with a hunter's quiver strapped to his back.

"You… You…" An Lushan pointed a shaking finger at Mergen. "How did you break free?!"

"You have me to thank for that," Lu Xu said, entering the courtyard from the southwest. He appeared to have undergone a strange

transformation: A black silk outer robe billowed in the wind, revealing snow-white inner robes beneath. A pair of short antlers, no more than three fingers long, had emerged from his brow, emitting a soft glow.

"I sealed a dream-memory in his mind," Lu Xu continued. "Then I sent him to you. Through his dreams, I was kept informed of your every move."

An Lushan's eyes bulged with shock.

"Why does it feel like everything's going in reverse today?" Qiu Yongsi laughed as he entered from the northwest, waving his folding fan. "Isn't it usually the enemy telling *us* how they orchestrated their plan?"

As An Lushan turned an astonished gaze on him, Qiu Yongsi snapped his fan shut, his expression turning grave. "Qiu Yongsi, the seventeenth Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal. Nice to meet you."

"It's because the chief and Mergen-ge's plan was perfectly thought out," Hongjun called out as he strode in from the northeast corner.

"You…" An Lushan snarled. "It's you!"

"It's me," Hongjun agreed. "I was supposed to become the next heavenly demon, Mara."

"Speaking of which, we owe you thanks." Li Jinglong's voice rang out as he at last stepped into the courtyard to stand before An Lushan. "But I'm sorry to say that you're not our target today. I'm Li Jinglong, chief of the Department of Exorcism and Marquis of Yardang. Pleased to make your acquaintance at last."

"Li Jinglong!" An Lushan sneered. "Someday that cleverness of yours will get you killed!"

An Lushan had heard Li Jinglong's name long before he arrived in Chang'an. At the time, he had scoffed at this twenty-year-old youngster and his band of exorcists. In his eyes, the only threat to his plans—and thus his only enemy—was Yang Guozhong.

But now, thanks to his own carelessness, he had met with unexpected failure. His four subordinates were dead, and he himself had fallen into their trap.

"Wait!" An Lushan yelled. "Let's make a deal!"

“I’ve already made my preparations, Governor,” Li Jinglong said gravely. An Lushan’s eyes widened as Li Jinglong continued. “Apologies, but we don’t have much time, nor are we in the habit of explaining our plans to our enemies before we kill them. It’s time to say goodbye.”

“Wait, wait—hold on!”

Li Jinglong raised his sword high and extended his left hand. An Lushan’s false thumb ring was a spiritual device specially designed by Qiu Yongsi, which Li Jinglong had imbued with a large quantity of the heart lamp’s power. Now, as Li Jinglong activated the heart lamp, white flame burst from the ring to engulf An Lushan.

An Lushan screamed in agony as the dark energy in his body began to disperse. “Li Jinglong! Let me go! You won’t regret it!” he howled.

Everyone watched anxiously. As Li Jinglong poured all his focus into his task, Hongjun, A-Tai, Qiu Yongsi, and the others gripped their spiritual devices. The heart lamp would only force the demonic energy from An Lushan’s body—the decisive blow had yet to be struck.

The pentacolor sacred light rippled in Hongjun’s hand. He could hardly believe it. *Is it really over? Have I really escaped my fate?!*

Li Jinglong brought all his strength to bear, and the heart lamp burned An Lushan with an endless stream of white fire. Throwing his head back in a great roar, An Lushan at last unleashed his spiritual device—a golden band around his neck transformed into a gleaming dragon, which lunged toward Li Jinglong, spitting lightning.

Hongjun was ready and waiting; he threw out his sacred light to shield Li Jinglong. Undeterred, An Lushan spread his hands. The rings and other accessories on his body all transformed into ferocious beasts, which sprang out to bite the exorcists who stood in their way. Qiu Yongsi and Mergen took turns at the fore, Mergen’s nailhead arrows flying in all directions as they protected Li Jinglong from the onslaught.

“This…is impossible!” An Lushan’s voice deepened into a hoarse and terrible growl as he glowered at Li Jinglong.

Li Jinglong could feel the heart lamp’s power begin to slip from his control; An Lushan was far more difficult to suppress than he had imagined. “Lend me your spiritual power!” he shouted.

Cold winds scoured the mountain around Daming Palace. Brambles burst from the ground, surrounding Li Jinglong in thorny vines. All around him in the courtyard, countless dark monsters sprang up, transforming the palace into a bloody scene from hell.

Chapter 119:
A Bolt from the Blue

HONGJUN SWUNG at a black monster with his saber. A slash of his blade dispatched the creature, and he hurried over to Li Jinglong.

Stepping out from the shadows of the corridor, Lu Xu took a running start and leapt into the air, his body radiating white light as his antlers grew and lengthened. The glowing youth soared across the sky toward An Lushan.

“Dream,” the deer king commanded, his voice echoing over the mountain.

An Lushan looked up with wide eyes as Lu Xu flew toward him, his gleaming figure reflected in An Lushan’s dark pupils.

Lu Xu extended two fingers in a sword seal, touched it to his antlers, then tapped An Lushan firmly on the forehead. The surrounding air rippled outward from the spot he touched as An Lushan’s gaze went slack and his movements stilled. In the split second it took Lu Xu to cast his spiritual technique, black flames were already licking up his fingers. He bounded up and away, soaring to even greater heights.

Across the courtyard, Hongjun had reached Li Jinglong. Unleashing the pentacolor sacred light containing all his cultivation, he pushed out his hands, and power poured into Li Jinglong like a raging sea. A breath later, Qiu Yongsi, Mergen, and A-Tai followed suit.

Li Jinglong’s combat robes snapped in the wind as he pressed his palms together. The power of the heart lamp intensified, and the hazy image of the Light-Bearer Dipamkara appeared behind him.

Everyone stared at Li Jinglong in awe as he rose into the air. He had reached the limit of his spiritual power and was on the verge of manifesting the god. Light enveloped him, and the faint shape of Dipamkara’s armor overlaid itself on his body. His brows became fiery lines, and his hair grew shorter as it transformed into burning flames.

“The glorious eon is past. The light of Dipamkara shines upon all living beings,” Li Jinglong said, his voice richer and deeper. Turning slightly aside, he set his right hand lightly over his open left palm, forming the shape of a lamp before pushing both hands forward.

Countless beams of light flared to life, transforming into glowing threads that wove together and shot toward An Lushan. An Lushan screamed in agony, collapsing in a dead faint as a mass of black energy—the heart demon—tore from his body with a roar.

“It’s out!” Mergen shouted.

For all his planning, Li Jinglong hadn’t expected An Lushan to be such a tough opponent. He needed to end this battle quickly. He rose higher into the air. The heart demon darted toward the walls of the courtyard, trying to escape, and the members of the Department of Exorcism met it once again on the rooftops.

“Hongjun!” Mergen called.

Hongjun gathered his pentacolor sacred light and unleashed it once more, expanding it into a brilliant barrier that enclosed the entire courtyard. Qiu Yongsi brandished his brush, and the world changed color, the surrounding buildings melting into ink-wash paintings that drifted away.

Hongjun watched anxiously as the heart demon struggled. Lu Xu shot him a warning look—they couldn’t afford to be reckless now.

Everyone reeled back as a towering beam of light swallowed Li Jinglong. Unlike the golden-armored warrior of Hongjun’s memories, the Li Jinglong before him now had transformed into a divine being clad in white armor. His left hand glowed with an eye-searing brightness, illuminating the black mass of demonic energy. The heart demon’s edges seemed to fray beneath the glare as the demonic energy streamed endlessly into the air, where it scattered.

He’s become so strong! Hongjun watched in awe. In all the time they’d been together, it seemed to him that Li Jinglong had always been supported by the strength of his convictions—it was this rock-solid foundation that had allowed him to become as powerful as he was now.

Li Jinglong swept his right arm out, and the Sword of Wisdom appeared in his hand. “Begone, demon!”

He stabbed into the heart demon, the blade flaring with blinding radiance as the creature shivered and hissed around it.

Hongjun looked on, the flickering light reflected in his eyes. Li Jinglong had done the same the night of their battle at the Mogao Caves; in the end, what had flown out of that heart demon was one of Xie Yu's souls.

Li Jinglong's hand shook around the hilt of his sword. He had imbued the Sword of Wisdom with an unprecedented amount of spiritual power. Screaming, the heart demon conjured a pair of sharp claws and wrapped them around the Sword of Wisdom.

"Let me go." An Lushan's voice rumbled. "You can't possibly keep this up… Let me go. Whatever it is that you want…I'll give it to you…"

Li Jinglong's gaze was unwavering. "You must die—today…" he ground out. "For Hongjun's sake, I have to kill you…"

He roared, white flame bursting from his eyes and searing into the heart demon, whose screams grew only shriller and more terrified. Beneath the onslaught of that incandescent white gale, its demonic energy scattered like sand before the wind. The demon seed within it dimmed from black to purple, then from purple to gray, slowly revealing the faint outline of an ouroboros twisting within its center. The instant the last wisps of demonic energy dissipated, the serpentine soul startled awake, hissing as it struggled against its confines.

"*Stop!*" Hongjun shouted.

The moment he'd seen those white flames erupt from Li Jinglong's eyes, he knew Li Jinglong was feeding the heart lamp with his true essence, burning through his life force. He dove from the rooftop and threw his arms around Li Jinglong's waist.

"Stay away from him!" A-Tai shouted.

A surge of luminous energy slammed into Hongjun. Unlike the warmth he usually felt from Li Jinglong, this radiance burned straight through his soul. To make matters worse, the seal Li Jinglong had placed on his heart drew from the same source. Now it resonated with the power pouring out of Li Jinglong, searing into his soul like a branding iron. Hongjun gritted his teeth, enduring the pain as he pulled Li Jinglong away

from the heart demon just in time to dodge the serpentine soul as it shook off the last of its restraints.

A thunderous roar sounded in the distance. A black jiao soared through the clouds, circling the night sky once before lowering its head and hurtling toward Daming Palace.

“Xie Yu!” Mergen cried.

“That’s impossible!” Lu Xu exclaimed. “How did he know what we were planning?!”

“Retreat!” Qiu Yongsi barked.

Everyone began to withdraw, just as they’d planned. The courtyard was littered with wisps of demonic energy like thick daubs of black ink. Trapped there by Hongjun’s barrier, the writhing soul glowed faintly with pale green light, hissing shrilly as it careened back and forth, seeking escape.

The fire and light wreathing Li Jinglong were snuffed out as Hongjun rolled them to the side, slamming them into a corner of the courtyard. The flames in Li Jinglong’s eyes extinguished themselves, and his gaze turned vacant. He turned and spat out a mouthful of blood—not red, but gold.

Caught in the splatter, Hongjun immediately felt a searing pain. The gold blood burned straight through his robes where it touched him, turning the cloth to ash and blistering the skin beneath, but he paid it no heed. He pressed his palms to Li Jinglong’s back and began to channel spiritual power into his body.

“What were you thinking?!” Hongjun cried, his voice choked. Where had Li Jinglong learned such a forbidden technique?! The power of the heart lamp had rampaged through his heart, lungs, liver, spleen, and kidneys, burning him from the inside out. Li Jinglong’s lips parted as if to answer, but he only threw up another mouthful of golden blood.

The moment Hongjun diverted his spiritual power into Li Jinglong, the luminous barrier cloaking the courtyard winked out. The pentacolor sacred light rushed into Li Jinglong’s body, colliding with and stabilizing the fearsome power of the heart lamp.

Thank goodness I stopped him in time… Thank goodness I stopped him in time!

Had he been a second later, Li Jinglong would have burned himself up with the power of the heart lamp, completely becoming the spiritual manifestation of the god.

Li Jinglong's eyes were unfocused as the blood dripping from his mouth slowly darkened to its original red. Hongjun pushed a medicinal pellet into his mouth.

But it was already too late to retreat—the black jiao Xie Yu was upon them. Xie Yu landed in the courtyard of Daming Palace and transformed into Yang Guozhong.

"Instead of using the six artifacts of Acalanatha to dispel the demonic energy, you ignited your true essence to unleash the full power of Dipamkara," Yang Guozhong said gravely. "It seems the Marquis of Yardang will stop at nothing to exorcise the heavenly demon."

Hongjun hugged Li Jinglong tighter to his chest, staring at Yang Guozhong in shock as the other exorcists scattered to the corners of the courtyard.

"The soul you wanted has been released, Xie Yu," Hongjun said. "Our transaction is complete!"

"But no one notified me to come retrieve my third soul," Yang Guozhong replied coldly. "You were planning on destroying my soul as well, weren't you?"

The serpentine soul hovered around Yang Guozhong as he stood beneath the remaining wisps of demonic energy, gazing down at Hongjun and Li Jinglong with a look that could only be described as pity. Li Jinglong attempted to struggle to his feet, but he had no strength. Hongjun trembled as he clasped Li Jinglong's hand and squeezed.

"Will you do it now?" Yang Guozhong's eyes came to rest on Hongjun. He pointed at the mass of demonic energy overhead. "Will you sacrifice yourself by absorbing An Lushan's demonic energy and transforming into the heavenly demon Mara? Of course, once you choose to descend into demonhood, no one will be able to stop you. Come, break the seal Li Jinglong placed on you. Devour this demonic energy."

Hongjun started in surprise. His voice shook as he asked, “How do you know all this?!”

Yang Guozhong smiled at the exorcists’ stunned expressions. “Hongjun, if I were to say that I watched you grow up…would you believe me? Since the moment you entered the Department of Exorcism, your every move has been under my surveillance. Why else would I allow you all to do whatever you pleased right under my nose?”

A thousand thoughts rushed through Hongjun’s mind, crystallizing in a startling realization. It was the most terrifying possibility, the one he was most reluctant to face—

A shivering carp yao stepped out from behind Yang Guozhong.

Silence fell over the courtyard. The carp yao trembled uncontrollably, wringing his hands. “Hongjun, I’m sorry…”

“You—you… Zhao Zilong… You…” Hongjun couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Just as all the world’s birds revere the phoenix, all the world’s aquatic creatures obey dragons and jiao,” Yang Guozhong said placidly. “Why can’t you understand such a simple concept? Ten years ago, I sent six fish yao to wait for you in a stream at the foot of the Taihang Mountains. You rescued this one through a twist of fate.”

“Traitor!”

Hongjun watched as the carp yao slowly backed away. “Hongjun, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “Everyone, I’m sorry… I really want to become a dragon, and if I can’t become a dragon, then a jiao is okay too…”

Hongjun let go of Li Jinglong and got slowly to his feet, his eyes lost. “Zhao Zilong, have you been lying to me all this time?”

Scenes from the past flashed through Hongjun’s mind. The carp yao’s attempted intervention when Hongjun had accepted Li Jinglong’s confession of love, his awkward equivocation when they discussed Xie Yu, his hesitance when they set their plan into motion…

“I-I can’t jump over the Dragon Gate,” the carp yao said, his voice so small he seemed to be talking to himself. “The legends are all—all fake…”

He glanced up at Hongjun before ducking behind Yang Guozhong's legs once more.

"I promised him that once I regained my three immortal souls and obtained all the world's demonic energy, I would grant him some of my power to help him become a dragon," Yang Guozhong explained. "It's an excellent deal—"

"Shut up!" Hongjun roared, overwhelmed with grief and anger.

"Hongjun!" Mergen cried.

Before anyone could stop him, Hongjun summoned his saber and lunged toward Yang Guozhong. The carp yao screamed and scrambled backward, but Yang Guozhong merely waved a hand, conjuring a great sword to block Hongjun's strike. The pillars of the surrounding buildings collapsed as the saber whipped past. Yang Guozhong's figure disintegrated, and he rose into the air to merge with the demonic energy overhead.

"We need to go!" Mergen shouted. Lu Xu leapt forward to pull Hongjun away. The exorcists prepared to withdraw even as Hongjun continued to scream in fury.

Yang Guozhong transformed into a black jiao, demonic energy roiling off his sinuous body. He wheeled through the sky and drew the serpentine soul and cloud of demonic energy freed from An Lushan toward himself. Hongjun threw out his hands and began drawing the energy away from him.

"Hongjun!" Mergen yelled again, rushing toward him.

Hongjun bounded into the air, his eyes fiery with wrath. "Xie Yu!"

The faint silhouette of the demon seed flashed in Hongjun's chest. But the seal Li Jinglong had placed kept it firmly bound. Pain spiked through Hongjun's heart, and his knees buckled.

"You can't break Li Jinglong's seal," Xie Yu said coldly, changing back into human form once more. "It's over."

"We'll see about that." Hongjun gritted his teeth, crooking his fingers and pulling them through the air. The mass of black energy containing the serpentine soul rumbled toward Hongjun. But it could only swirl around him; it couldn't enter the demon seed within his chest.

Even the demonic energy within Yang Guozhong was drawn toward the magnetic force within Hongjun.

“How… This is impossible!” Yang Guozhong shouted, furious.

Rather than absorbing the demonic energy, Hongjun gathered it into a dark mass in his hand and shot it back at Yang Guozhong. The blast struck with the force of a thousand pounds, sending him flying. Shattered brick and stone exploded in all directions. Yang Guozhong’s human body couldn’t withstand the blast; he shifted back into a black jiao and writhed away.

Qiu Yongsi’s voice rang out from a far corner of the courtyard. “It’s my turn, Xie Yu!”

He pushed out his left hand, the fingers of his right folded into a sword seal. “Rise!”

A fierce gale whipped through the courtyard of Daming Palace, ripping the wooden pillars from their foundations. A spiritual array appeared on the ground beneath Xie Yu, and a thousand beams of blue light shot straight into the sky. High above, shimmering silhouettes swooped through the clouds above the array—the souls of countless soaring dragons.

The blue light rose higher and higher, the topmost reaches of the beams fading into luminescent dust. Xie Yu roared, thrashing in all directions as he hurled himself against his brilliant confines.

“First you exorcise the heavenly demon to lure me into coming to retrieve my soul,” the black jiao snarled. “Then you draw a spiritual array at Daming Palace to trap me so you can throw me back into the bottom of the Dragon-Quelling Tower! A brilliant plan indeed. But your little friend interrupted the mantra of Dipamkara Li Jinglong tried to use. How else do you hope to defeat me?” The black jiao glared down at Qiu Yongsi. “Young Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal! Do you really think an array like this is enough to hold me?!”

Qiu Yongsi’s hands trembled as he struggled to maintain the array. More and more dragon souls filled the air, blanketing the sky as they wheeled overhead.

“Hongjun!” Lu Xu shouted. “Draw the demonic energy away!”

Snapping back to his senses, Hongjun promptly dragged the black cloud toward him, gathering it into a dense ball of energy surrounding the serpentine soul. The soul struggled fiercely, trying to break free of Hongjun's control.

Xie Yu whipped around, snarling. He charged toward Hongjun, opening his jaws to swallow the black pearl of energy.

"Hold on!" Hongjun was startled to hear Li Jinglong's voice behind him—who knew when he'd gotten to his feet. A second later, Hongjun staggered as the heart lamp's power caught him and yanked him back thirty feet, sending him crashing into Li Jinglong's arms.

Li Jinglong raised his sword, marshaling the last of his strength. Light coruscated over the blade. Xie Yu roared in fury and rolled through the air toward them, only to be obstructed by a gray and white blur—the gray wolf and the white deer had rushed forward, taking turns slamming into the jiao to protect Li Jinglong and Hongjun.

Keeping one arm wrapped around Hongjun, Li Jinglong drove his sword into the ground with the other to keep himself upright. "Xie Yu…" he began haltingly. "Perhaps you shouldn't be so confident in your spies."

Hongjun turned to look at Li Jinglong in astonishment as he straightened up. Gathering all his energy, he leveled his sword at Xie Yu, still entrapped in Qiu Yongsi's spiritual array. "Today…I will deal with you too!"

"Jinglong!" Hongjun cried out as the black jiao lunged toward them with a roar. In a flash, the gray wolf and white deer appeared beside them. The gray wolf pounced on the black jiao and tore into his scaly body with vicious fangs, while the white deer locked its antlers with the black jiao's single sharp horn and flipped gracefully in midair, wrenching Xie Yu's neck back and slamming him into the ground.

"So I'm your true target today," Xie Yu snarled. He twisted again and flew into the air, swallowing demonic energy in his gaping jaws as he circled the courtyard, still unable to escape.

"It seems…even your most competent spy didn't know about the spiritual array in Daming Palace," Li Jinglong said. He was clearly exhausted. "Xie Yu, it's time you surrendered to your fate."

“You think you can defeat me?!” Xie Yu roared. He breathed a mouthful of flame and lightning at the injured Li Jinglong. Hongjun threw up the pentacolor sacred light, struggling to maintain the barrier as the jiao’s breath crackled over it.

“Is the array finished yet?” Mergen shouted at Qiu Yongsi, touching down on the ground in wolf form.

Qiu Yongsi’s lips moved rapidly in an incantation. There were already nearly ten thousand dragon souls soaring in the sky, painting the mountain in shimmering indigo. A hurricane of energy swept through the palace grounds and spread outward, transforming the plain in front of the mountain into a sea of light.

Chapter 120:
The Monochrome Hourglass

"DIE!" XIE YU RUMBLED. But as he spat out another mouthful of lightning-streaked flame, a voice rose from the corner of the courtyard, growing clearer with each word spoken.

"If I am in the depths of darkness, ignite my soul and incinerate the filth in this world…

"If I am in the heart of a raging fire, ignite my soul and light the eternal flame…

"If I am in the midst of a vast void, ignite my soul and transform it into an almighty light…"

A-Tai recited the incantation in his gentle voice, his sleeveless vest billowing in the wind as his irises turned from indigo to a deep crimson and his brown curls brightened to a fiery red. The golden thumb ring that held the sacred flame of Zoroaster hovered within his cupped hands, charmed inscriptions crawling over its surface as it turned a brilliant scarlet, as if heated by raging fire.

Xie Yu snaked his head around just as A-Tai shouted the last words of the incantation: "In the name of Zoroaster, on behalf of Ahura Mazda, release the light that drives out the filth. Atar, the sacred flame—incinerate the darkness!"

A-Tai raised the gold ring in offering and pushed it gently forward. Light burst from either side of the ring as it floated through the air. The side facing Xie Yu erupted in a gout of fire, while the side facing A-Tai shot out a beam of dazzling radiance that bathed him from head to toe. An enormous pair of wings unfurled from A-Tai's back, so expansive they blocked out the night sky.

It was as if a comet had appeared in the courtyard of Daming Palace, its flaming tail trailing to the north as it cast a brilliant circle of light, illuminating all the trees and rocks for miles around.

The courtyard had transformed into a sea of fire. Qiu Yongsi was still chanting his incantation, but the spiritual array was nearly complete. The scales on Xie Yu's body began to blacken and char as A-Tai struck him with blast after blast of the sacred flame. Like the heart lamp, the sacred flame Atar burned away the miasma of demonic energy permeating the air.

Turning, Hongjun scanned the flaming wreckage for Zhao Zilong. He finally spotted the carp yao trapped within a pile of burning wooden pillars, crying pitifully. "Help! Help!"

Hongjun panted harshly, his eyes a reflection of the fiery scene.

The carp yao tried several times to jump out, but beyond those flames lay even more flames. The ground was blisteringly hot—another minute, and Zhao Zilong would become a roasted fish.

Beside him, Li Jinglong gave Hongjun a gentle push. Unable to bear it any longer, Hongjun regathered his pentacolor sacred light and redirected its power, sweeping away the flaming pillars trapping Zhao Zilong. The carp yao turned to stare at the light's wielder in shock, meeting Hongjun's furious eyes.

"Go! Get the fuck out of here!" Hongjun yelled.

The carp yao hesitated, unsure how to respond.

Across the courtyard, Qiu Yongsi had completed the spiritual array. "Upon the watchtowers of heavenly garrisons, banners billow amid gleaming halberds and the cold light of bells—seal!"

The gray wolf, the white deer, and A-Tai promptly leapt beyond the bounds of the spiritual array. Tens of thousands of dragon souls roared overhead as a second pair of gleaming arrays formed—one in the sky, one on the earth—and pressed toward each other with crushing force.

Hovering in midair, Xie Yu transformed once more into Yang Guozhong. His clothes had been burnt to tatters, his hair was charred, and his body was covered in a dozen bleeding wounds. He looked up at the sky, then down at the ground.

Qiu Yongsi held his spread hands out before him, his right palm over his left, and slowly pressed them together. His face was streaked with ash,

and his eyes watered from the stifling smoke, but when he spoke, his voice was crisp and cold.

“Go back where you belong.”

The upper and lower spiritual arrays flashed with lightning as the dragon souls gathered to wrap their bodies around the seal, pulling the arrays closer and closer together. Yang Guozhong couldn’t escape, even if he tried.

Just before Qiu Yongsi clapped his hands together, Yang Guozhong murmured, “It’s too early.”

His charred sleeves flicked as he produced a strange hourglass. Its globes were filled with black and white sand, and a golden dragon coiled around it. With a twist of his wrist, he flipped it upside down.

The sand seemed to take on a life of its own. It scattered within the glass, swirling and intermixing as it ran from the upper chamber into the lower one. Yet even here there was an oddness: Only the black sand flowed to the lower chamber—the white remained fixed at the top.

At once, everyone felt themselves seized by an irresistible force. Their minds were still clear, but their bodies, wrested from their control, began to move in reverse. Hongjun tried to shout but found himself unable to speak. Qiu Yongsi couldn’t so much as turn his head to call a warning.

In that small space between heaven and earth, something exceedingly strange was happening, and at rapid speed: Under the power of the hourglass, time was flowing backward.

The gap between Qiu Yongsi's palms widened once more, and the twin seals pulled apart, returning to their original positions in the sky and on the ground. Bodies strangely bent, the dragon souls drifted back toward the horizon, where they merged with the heavenly meridians and returned to nothingness.

The carp yao scampered backward into a sea of flames, and smoldering chunks of wood flew from all directions, returning to the scene of the fire. The pentacolor sacred light rose into the air, gathering back into Hongjun's hands—

The towering conflagration flowed toward A-Tai, streaming back into the thumb ring held in his hands.

Yang Guozhong's form expanded back into a black jiao. The burnt scales that had peeled away flew toward him and reattached themselves to his hide as puddles of blood leapt from the ground and poured back into his body. The gray wolf and the white deer fell away from his sides, springing backward and retreating the way they came…

Hongjun threw out a ball of demonic energy, which dispersed into a thick black cloud, before dropping to one knee to support Li Jinglong. They stared at each other; gold blood splattered Hongjun's clothes before flying away and streaming into Li Jinglong's mouth.

The power of the heart lamp surged back into Li Jinglong. All the energy in his body flowed in reverse, mending his meridians one by one. Hongjun grabbed him by the waist, and they soared into the air, where they hung suspended high over the courtyard.

The broken rubble—knocked loose by the force of their fight—returned to its places in the fissured walls, seamlessly filling in the cracks to restore Daming Palace to its original state.

The roiling demonic energy gathered again in the air and was absorbed by the serpentine soul, revealing the black mass of the heart demon. Twin streams of flame shot through the air in a strange arc to gather in Li Jinglong's eyes. Hongjun released him and stepped away as Li

Jinglong stabbed the heart demon with the Sword of Wisdom. The light bursting from the heart demon dimmed and was reabsorbed; Li Jinglong withdrew the Sword of Wisdom. He raised the blade over his shoulder and extended his left palm outward, adopting the stance he'd taken before striking with his sword.

Nearly all the black sand had fallen into the lower chamber. Holding the hourglass, Yang Guozhong hovered above the scene like a god gazing down upon all living beings with contempt.

"The six directions constitute the universe, while the past, present, and future constitute time."[4] His voice echoed through this frozen patch of time and space. "You have laid your lives on the line today—but what a pity. The heavens do not abide by the wishes of mortals."

The reversal of time was nearly complete, the final grain of sand beginning to fall. Just as Li Jinglong was about to back away, Yang Guozhong turned the hourglass on its side.

Time stopped.

Keeping the final grain of sand caught in the neck of the hourglass, Yang Guozhong touched down in the center of the courtyard. Li Jinglong, Lu Xu, Hongjun, Mergen, Qiu Yongsi, and A-Tai were all ranged around him, a mere ten feet away. The exorcists struggled with all their might, but still, they could not move.

Casually, Yang Guozhong reached out and slapped Hongjun on the back. His strike contained the full force of a jiao, strong enough to split mountains. Hongjun's vision swam as his internal organs ruptured on impact, but he couldn't even spit out a mouthful of blood.

Li Jinglong stared in horrified silence.

"I'll deal with you brats later," Yang Guozhong said coldly, holding the hourglass steady in his other hand.

The heart demon, condensed back into its original form, continued to struggle. Spotting Yang Guozhong, it snarled, "Xie Yu!"

Yang Guozhong looked up. An identical serpentine mass of demonic energy uncoiled from his chest and opened its mouth, slowly sucking in the heart demon.

“Let me go!” the heart demon roared wildly.

“I spent so much time rearing you all, just for the sake of this moment,” Yang Guozhong murmured. “Really, is reuniting with me so terrible?”

A pair of throwing knives hurtled from a remote corner behind Yang Guozhong, scoring tracks into the ground as they skidded across the courtyard at an oblique angle. A gust of wind ripped across the grass pushing through the cracks in the pavement, sending broken leaves fluttering as the blades spun in a deadly arc toward the hourglass in Yang Guozhong’s hand.

A bright flash blinded everyone, followed by two sharp cracks as the knives struck both ends of the hourglass. Sand burst outward in a silent explosion, black and white shimmering in the wind.

Yang Guozhong whipped around to see Ashina Adarvan, two more throwing knives clutched in his hands.

“I’ve been playing dead so long, my back is killing me. Just as we expected, Chancellor Yang, you didn’t notice there was still one more person to deal with.”

The moment the hourglass shattered, everyone regained control of their bodies. Hongjun vomited a mouthful of blood and sank to the ground. Li Jinglong, having fully recovered with the reversal of time, rushed to him with a desperate cry.

Yang Guozhong immediately realized he had made his first grave mistake.

Aside from Hongjun, the other exorcists had all regained their strength and were as good as fresh reinforcements.

Li Jinglong wielded the Sword of Wisdom, A-Tai held the ring containing the sacred flame Atar, and Qiu Yongsi was the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal who had come for the express purpose of capturing him. Both the gray wolf and the white deer were at full power—and as for Ashina Adarvan, from what Yang Guozhong’s soul had seen of him in Dunhuang, he could make himself the temporary host of the Zoroastrian god of war.

To make matters worse, his greatest weapon—the hourglass that allowed him to turn back time and reverse cause and effect—had been destroyed.

Panting harshly, Li Jinglong stood before Hongjun's limp body with the Sword of Wisdom held before him. His eyes flashed with rage as he stared at Yang Guozhong, as if he was ready to burn down the world, even at the cost of his life.

Blood dribbled from the corner of Hongjun's mouth. That single strike had ruptured nearly all of his meridians. Luckily, he had inherited his father's yao blood; had he been an ordinary mortal, he would have been reduced to a mangled pulp and died on the spot. Even so, he'd taken the blow completely undefended. His eyes were vacant as blood streamed from his nose and mouth and pooled on the ground.

"Truce!" Yang Guozhong cried. "You can't kill me, and I can't kill you. Take Kong Hongjun away to heal his wounds—"

But Li Jinglong was crazed with fury. A roar tore from his throat as he lunged at Yang Guozhong with his sword held high.

This was Yang Guozhong's second mistake: He had assumed that, no matter what, Li Jinglong would remain rational. He'd always regarded this young man as a strong and measured opponent who calmly evaluated his enemies and weighed his options before acting. He'd never expected Li Jinglong to become so enraged that he'd deafen his ears to Yang Guozhong's entreaties.

But at this moment, a single thought burned in Li Jinglong's mind: He was going to kill Yang Guozhong.

Yang Guozhong realized at once that this was the end of a plot that had been years in the making. No matter how his companions were injured, Li Jinglong had never lost his wits so completely. He could think of only one explanation—someone had placed a seal on Li Jinglong's emotions long ago, which had failed in the face of his desperate rage.

But the realization had come too late. This time, Yang Guozhong admitted to himself as he felt the sword pierce his flesh, he had lost fair and square.

He looked down at his chest, where the Sword of Wisdom protruded, and made a snap decision. He expelled one of his souls.

The decision saved both his life and his thousand years of cultivation. A second later, Li Jinglong transformed as the Sword of Wisdom began to gleam with a warm light that spread up his arm and across his chest, encasing him in golden armor.

Just as expected… Xie Yu thought as his soul, freed from his mortal shell, took off into the air in a flurry of black energy. With a single glance, he confirmed his suspicion: He had fallen into a decades-old trap laid by a different opponent.

Li Jinglong gave a furious shout, wreathed in golden light. Before, he had manifested Dipamkara's white battle armor—now, as he lost himself, he was possessed by the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha. The Sword of Wisdom sparked with tangled bands of electricity as it burned through the black energy still inside Yang Guozhong's body.

Lu Xu hurried forward to scoop up Hongjun.

"Chief!" Mergen yelled.

"Don't touch him!" A-Tai shouted. "Retreat!"

Everyone watched Li Jinglong helplessly. The golden light was too bright; the glare threatened to blind them. No one could get close. Shaking off his shock, Qiu Yongsi rapidly recited an incantation, forming a circle with his hands, then clasping them together before his chest.

The scattered sand of the broken hourglass coalesced into a beam of light that gathered in Qiu Yongsi's hands, where it solidified into a slowly spinning yin-yang sphere.

Xie Yu shed his human form and turned once again into a black jiao, but he remained pinned by the Sword of Wisdom. Demonic energy burned away beneath the golden light, evaporating into the sky as it returned to the heavenly meridians.

Tossing his head in a furious roar, Xie Yu opened his mouth and spat out a mass of black energy, disgorging the heart demon with its serpentine soul he had absorbed just minutes ago.

“Look out!” Lu Xu shouted. He shoved Hongjun into Mergen’s arms and shifted back into the white deer, charging toward Li Jinglong. He had to calm Li Jinglong down at least long enough to fight off the heart demon’s incursion—but to everyone’s shock, the roiling mass of black energy didn’t head for the chief. It hurtled toward the corner of the courtyard, where the heavy body of An Lushan lay motionless—

The heart demon rushed back into An Lushan with a bang like a clap of thunder.

An Lushan’s eyes flew open. None of them had expected that, to prevent Li Jinglong from burning it away, Xie Yu would return the demonic energy he’d just gone to such pains to gather to An Lushan.

“Stop him!” Mergen cried.

Pandemonium ensued as the white deer turned to charge at An Lushan.

“Yongsi, you handle things here!” Mergen shouted again as he joined Lu Xu.

An Lushan had no intention of fighting on. Soaring into the air, he loosed a barrage of writhing demonic missiles that rained down like meteors on the exorcists below.

Bent solely on escape, he’d unleashed his most powerful attack. The black meteors bombarded the courtyard, knocking Lu Xu and Mergen back to earth. The only one who could counter the demonic energy was Li Jinglong, who had lost his mind as he battled with Xie Yu.

An Lushan sped toward the horizon and disappeared with a boom that shook the mountain.

Mergen panted with rage. “Damn it!”

Meanwhile, Li Jinglong—shining in golden armor—had wiped out nearly all the demonic energy Xie Yu had absorbed over the years; all that remained was the flickering blue soul of a snake. Xie Yu finally lost his composure and opened his bloody maw in a furious hiss.

Struck by an idea, A-Tai shouted at Qiu Yongsi, “Seal him!”

Qiu Yongsi was way ahead of him—he had already begun reciting the incantation. But it took time to reactivate the Dragon-Quelling

Technique.

Drawing on his inner core, Xie Yu released the last of his power in an explosive burst. With a great rumble, the courtyard sank into the earth.

Head lolling against Mergen's chest, Hongjun murmured, "Jing… long…"

"Hongjun!" Mergen cried in alarm.

Xie Yu's blow hadn't only destroyed Hongjun's meridians; Li Jinglong's seal on his heart was in tatters. Without it, the demonic energy around them slowly began to corrode his body.

A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan flew over as well, pouring their spiritual power into Hongjun to protect his heart meridian.

"It…hurts…"

A short distance away, Li Jinglong's heart spasmed in pain as a clear voice floated into his ears.

"Mommy… Daddy… Help me… I… It hurts…"

"Di Renjie!"

"In just a moment, it won't hurt anymore. Ignite my immortal soul, dispel my mortal forms…"

The golden armor dimmed and disappeared. Li Jinglong's voice shook. "Hongjun?!"

In Mergen's arms, Hongjun opened sightless eyes, blood spilling from his mouth. "Jing…long…"

Finally waking from his madness, Li Jinglong shouted and swung his sword with all his might, sending Xie Yu flying. Xie Yu uttered a plaintive cry, green jiao blood misting the air as he crashed through the courtyard wall and plummeted into the ravine beyond.

Li Jinglong turned and dashed over to Hongjun, gathering him into his arms. Activating the heart lamp, he pressed a hand to Hongjun's chest, feeding him the lamp's power.

As the heart lamp entered his meridians, Hongjun felt a faint warmth amid the pain. The white light flowed endlessly into him, reinforcing the

seal over his heart. He fell into unconsciousness, sinking into a beautiful dreamscape.

Chapter 121:
After the Battle

HONGJUN SLEPT for what felt like a lifetime. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he registered was the sound of birdsong.

“He’s awake! He’s awake!” Qiu Yongsi’s voice rang out. “Fetch the chief, quick—”

The moment Hongjun tried to move, his entire body screamed in pain. A stampede of overlapping footsteps pounded in the corridor outside as nearly every member of the Department of Exorcism swarmed into his room.

“How do you feel?” Li Jinglong asked with concern. His eyes were bloodshot.

Hongjun groaned softly. “It hurts…”

“The medicine’s worn off,” Mergen said, carrying over a bowl that smelled faintly of herbs. “Here, drink some more.”

Hongjun sniffed the bowl, detecting corydalis, a pain reliever that caused drowsiness. “I can’t have too much of this…”

Mergen poured some out to lower the dosage. Li Jinglong took the bowl from his hands and carefully tipped the contents into Hongjun’s mouth. Greatly relieved that Hongjun was awake, the others dispersed, leaving only Li Jinglong and Lu Xu to watch over him with worried eyes.

“Is everyone all right?” Hongjun asked.

“Everyone’s fine,” Li Jinglong said with a smile. “We don’t have to pay for the damages at Daming Palace either. Don’t worry.”

“But Zhao Zilong’s gone, isn’t he?”

Li Jinglong hadn’t expected Hongjun to ask about Zhao Zilong the moment he woke up. He hummed, then added, “No one blames him.”

“Jinglong, you already knew Zhao Zilong was Xie Yu’s man, didn’t you?”

“Xie Yu’s fish,” Ashina Adarvan called from outside.

Hongjun looked blankly toward the door.

Li Jinglong had fallen silent. Worried Hongjun was angry, Lu Xu spoke up from beside him. “The chief’s been watching over you all this time. He hasn’t slept in three whole days.”

Hongjun struggled to turn his head and offered Li Jinglong a wan smile. Li Jinglong’s eyes were red from exhaustion. He took Hongjun’s hand and pressed a careful kiss to his knuckles. “I’m sorry, Hongjun.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hongjun replied. “If anything…it’s my fault for being too stupid.”

“Get some rest,” Lu Xu said. “Everything’s…pretty much resolved. We can talk when you’re better.”

“Mm,” Hongjun murmured.

After Lu Xu left the room, Li Jinglong slumped over the bed, setting his head on his folded arms. “Do you still hurt anywhere?”

Hongjun’s internal organs were spasming with pain. He knew this was part of rebuilding his damaged meridians—he had suffered something similar once when Chong Ming used his powers as a phoenix to open up his meridians. Fortunately his body had retained some remnants of Chong Ming’s power, and thanks to this, along with the protection provided by Li Jinglong’s heart lamp, he would recover.

In retrospect, Yang Guozhong must have struck that blow in hopes of crippling him so he could steal him away. Only Hongjun could have survived it.

“My guess is the only thing Xie Yu wanted to leave intact was your life.” Li Jinglong looked up, studying Hongjun with the open gaze of a child. “That’s why he didn’t kill us—he intended to slowly torture us to death after absorbing all the demonic energy.”

Hongjun couldn’t help but shiver at the thought. “Then…what happened to him after?”

“He ran away,” Li Jinglong answered. “He’s probably hidden himself in some deserted place to recover from his injuries.”

An Lushan had nearly lost his life during the battle at Daming Palace and fled in the aftermath. Meanwhile, Li Jinglong had driven out most of Xie Yu's demonic energy. Xie Yu had not only failed to recover his third soul, he had suffered grave injuries and gone into hiding that very night. As for the carp yao—the creature Hongjun was most concerned about—he, too, had vanished into thin air. After the battle, Li Jinglong had raced the wounded Hongjun back to the Department of Exorcism, where everyone had tried their best to treat his injuries. Only A-Tai was left to pick through the scene of the battle. But he couldn't find any trace of the carp yao. Chances were, he had run away just like Xie Yu.

"What do we do next?" Hongjun asked.

"We wait for your injuries to heal," Li Jinglong said firmly. But he sounded more optimistic as he continued, "We've already destroyed two of Xie Yu's heart demons. All that's left is his third soul and the demonic energy in An Lushan. We have another tough fight ahead of us, but things are already looking much better than before."

It was true—Li Jinglong's meticulous plans were bringing them closer and closer to their ultimate victory. Although they had paid a heavy price, they had nevertheless dealt a devastating blow to their enemies.

They stared into each other's eyes for a quiet spell. At last, Hongjun asked, "How could you do that?"

After a brief moment of confusion, Li Jinglong realized he was referring to when he'd ignited his true essence to summon Dipamkara in his fight against An Lushan. He sighed.

"Who taught you that?" Hongjun pressed.

"The divine kun," Li Jinglong answered. "He taught me after you fell asleep riding on his back."

After revealing Hongjun's future on the way back to Chang'an, it seemed Yuan Kun had taught Li Jinglong a new technique while Hongjun was sleeping. It involved burning his true essence as a sacrifice to push the power of the heart lamp to its peak, shattering the limits of his mortal body to briefly become a demigod. Once ignited in this manner, Li Jinglong's true essence would deplete rapidly, becoming fuel for the wick as it burned.

“I had to purify An Lushan’s demonic energy before Xie Yu arrived,” Li Jinglong said. “I thought it was the best way to achieve all our goals in a single stroke.”

“But what about me?” Hongjun’s eyes filled with tears. He was suddenly seized by an overwhelming hopelessness. “Didn’t you spare a thought for me when you decided to do that?”

Li Jinglong was silent.

“Forget it,” Hongjun said abruptly.

“Hongjun.”

Hongjun turned away with difficulty. Tears coursed down his cheeks and left wet patches on the bed.

“Yes, I was wrong,” Li Jinglong said. “I knew you’d be angry. But I thought it through. It was a decision I made with all my heart, in full knowledge of the consequences, so I won’t make excuses. I want you to live well. I would die, but we could exorcise the heavenly demon. The Department of Exorcism would be shut down, but the human realm would be at peace. I knew you’d be angry with me for sacrificing myself. But I didn’t care, as long as you lived.”

Li Jinglong glanced at him. “You love me, right? As long as you love me, you can forgive anything. I knew that, in the months that followed, you would be so miserable you’d want to die—but the others would take care of you. I even left you a letter. I thought, if you read it, after a year or two, you would understand, and you wouldn’t be mad at me anymore.

“Maybe you would feel sad when you thought about the time we spent together…but five years from now, you would only see our love as a beautiful memory. Ten, twenty years from now, you would still remember, but my face would blur—by then, you’d have started a new life. After all, you still have so many years ahead of you, and nothing endures the test of time—”

“Stop talking,” Hongjun said, his voice choked. “I hate you.”

“I love you,” Li Jinglong said softly, almost to himself.

The only sound in the room was the shuddering rasp of Hongjun’s breathing. A long time later, when even that had quieted, Li Jinglong asked,

“Can I sleep next to you? I’m exhausted.”

The sharpness of Hongjun’s emotions had dulled slightly. “No,” he replied.

Ignoring him, Li Jinglong clambered onto the bed and nudged Hongjun closer to the wall. His movements were exceedingly gentle, as if he was afraid of hurting Hongjun with even the lightest touch.

“We’re over,” Hongjun said calmly. “I’m mad. I’m not your husband anymore. I’m divorcing you.”

Li Jinglong carefully tucked his arm under Hongjun’s head. He pressed dry lips to his cheek, then kissed away his tears.

“I’ll buy you the most delicious food,” Li Jinglong said, wrapping his other arm around Hongjun. “We’ll be together for a very, very long time. Look, this is almost over. You’ll be my wife for many years to come.”

Hongjun, still in too much pain to move, had no choice but to allow Li Jinglong to manhandle him as he pleased.

“I’ll take you to Yang Prefecture, to the Ba-Shu region… Wherever we go, we’ll stay for a couple years, just like you did when you were younger. Only this time, no one will come to threaten you. You can stay for as long as you like, until you want to go somewhere new…”

Li Jinglong wiped Hongjun’s tears with his sleeve as he rambled on. Slowly, his head dropped to Hongjun’s shoulder, and he began to snore softly.

Hongjun turned to look at him. A cut ran across his forehead, gotten who knew when during their fierce battle against Xie Yu. His complexion was ashen, and the Yintang point between his brows was dark, like that of a dying person. Hongjun’s heart ached at the sight of him, and his throat closed up again.

Li Jinglong slept soundly on without saying another word.

Sunlight streamed down over Qiu Yongsi as he stretched his arms overhead in the courtyard.

“Come on, let’s eat,” Ashina Adarvan called from the main hall. “No one’s had an easy time of it.”

This case of Xie Yu and An Lushan had come to a close, but there was no relief to be had when their hands were full with cleaning up the aftermath. Li Jinglong had spent three days at Hongjun’s bedside and couldn’t focus on anything they said, so Mergen had no choice but to take charge. There were still loose ends to tie up, such as notifying the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, beginning the investigation into the possible whereabouts of Yang Guozhong, and searching for the missing carp yao.

Noble Consort Yang’s birthday celebrations had ended in a joyful profusion of singing and dancing. Li Bai and Li Guinian had returned with the imperial couple to the palace and stayed overnight for the festivities. On the evening of the fight, when Li Guinian had spotted the skies changing and the black energy rolling across the north, he had known An Lushan had been defeated and promptly invented some puffery about good omens to pacify Li Longji.

However, no one could explain Yang Guozhong’s disappearance. After a full day passed with no sign of him, the Yang family began to panic. Li Longji was no idiot. Sensing this had something to do with the incident outside Daci’en Temple, he summoned Li Jinglong to the palace. Mergen came in his stead; the members of the Department of Exorcism, from top to bottom, were united in their assertion that they knew nothing of what might have befallen him.

The nation’s Right Chancellor had gone missing directly after Noble Consort Yang’s birthday, at the same time that a powerful military governor scurried back home without warning, yet the emperor was completely in the dark. The crown prince sent people to the Department of Exorcism to look into the matter, but they only ended up wandering in circles, unable to pass through the spiritual array on the front gate. The message was clear: *Closed for business. All visitors will be turned away, no matter who you are.*

The birthday festivities thus came to a messy conclusion. Yang Guozhong’s disappearance seemed to lift the lid on a current of dissatisfaction among the various departments of the imperial court. First, there were the three days’ worth of birthday celebrations, which had cost the National Treasury over four hundred thousand taels of silver. Next,

there was the arrest of countless officials who had flouted the law under the Yang family's protection, and the problem of the imperial guard, whose resentment had at long last reached a boiling point.

Pacifying the ministers already demanded all of Li Longji's time and attention, and by the third day, various voices in court had begun to whisper that Yang Guozhong was another monster executed by Li Jinglong and his merry band. With rumors about the Yang family swirling through the city of Chang'an, everyone's eyes turned to Noble Consort Yang.

Mergen was busy from dawn to dusk, running back and forth to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review to close the case as well as leading the search for Xie Yu. It rained twice in Chang'an in the days following Xie Yu's escape. Just as it had in the aftermath of the nine-tailed celestial fox's demise, the capital seemed scrubbed clean. The unnamable malevolence that had permeated the streets faded as the city recovered the vitality of the safely mundane.

After three days of hustle and bustle, and with Hongjun finally awake, everyone exhaled a sigh of relief.

Mergen fetched a bowl of noodles and settled down to eat with the others in the open-air corridor.

"This is too salty," A-Tai complained, prodding at his noodles.

"You forgot to pound the beef," Lu Xu added.

"I don't eat this stuff," Qiu Yongsi said as he picked out the shredded green onions and tossed them on the ground.

Only Mergen slurped down his food without comment.

Ashina Adarvan shot them a baleful glare. "If you don't like it, you cook next time!"

Everyone immediately changed their tune, smoothing Ashina Adarvan's raised hackles. It had always been the carp yao who did the cooking. Everyone had grown so accustomed to this arrangement that they never thought twice about it, but now that the fish was gone, food was suddenly a serious problem.

"Why do you suppose the boss did something so drastic as spying for Xie Yu?" A-Tai asked.

“Xie Yu said Zhao Zilong has been his undercover agent for ages,” Qiu Yongsi said with a laugh. “He was already Xie Yu’s man—I mean fish—long before he met any of us. If anything, siding with us would’ve been more drastic.”

“When things calm down a bit, we should try to bring him back,” Lu Xu said. “I kind of liked him.”

Sitting in a row beneath the eaves of the corridor, the exorcists couldn’t help but sigh at the thought of having to eat Ashina Adarvan’s cooking every day from now on.

“Don’t you Han people have a story about this?” Ashina Adarvan asked. “An old man lost his horse, but it was a blessing in disguise—you never know how things’ll turn out. If nothing else, at least now we can order braised carp.”

Mergen sprayed a mouthful of noodles, and Lu Xu slapped him on the back of the head. After everyone finished eating, they tossed their bowls aside and announced, “Time to get to work!”

They still had to close the case with the Imperial Court of Judicial Review and claim their salaries for the fourth month. Then there was the matter of searching out Xie Yu’s possible hiding spots and meeting with General Guo Ziyi to discuss whether there was any movement from An Lushan… There was simply no end to it.

Once everyone else had left, Mergen sat down by the well to wash the dishes while Lu Xu hung up laundry in the courtyard.

Mergen glanced up at Lu Xu while he worked, his eyes drawn to him again and again, as if entranced. Struck by a thought, Lu Xu turned, only to see Mergen duck his head and pretend to stare at the flowers, avoiding his gaze.

“Why do you always wear black now?” Lu Xu asked, examining Mergen’s damp combat robe as he hung it up. When Mergen didn’t respond, Lu Xu continued absently, “It’s way too hot in the summer to wear black.”

“Where are you going this afternoon?” Mergen asked.

“Nowhere. I’m staying home and keeping Hongjun company.”

“The chief’s in there.” Mergen dried a bowl with a scrap of cloth. “You shouldn’t disturb them.”

“Hongjun’s really upset, you know.”

“Give him some nice dreams, then. Make him forget Zhao Zilong.”

“You really think everyone’s memories can be changed at the snap of a finger,” Lu Xu sneered.

“If things don’t go the way you want, just change someone’s memory—isn’t that your favorite trick?”

“Do you *want* me to slap you?”

“No, my face is still swollen from last time.”

“You can use that bowl as a mirror now, with how hard you’re polishing it,” Lu Xu said drily.

Mergen hastily picked up a different bowl. After they’d bared everything to each other in the pool that day, Lu Xu no longer knew what to call his relationship with Mergen. At the time, it had felt like the walls between them had finally crumbled. But the morning after the battle with Xie Yu, Mergen acted like nothing happened. He’d made no mention of their tryst. At first Lu Xu had thought Mergen was merely waiting for a private moment to seek him out for an honest conversation…but even now, he still hadn’t.

He hadn’t said a word.

Lu Xu fumed in silence. *I’ll wait,* he thought. *Let’s see how long you can keep this up.*

Since returning to the team, Mergen had gone back to his old ways, with one exception: He stopped always playing the nice guy and no longer bothered to hide his true self. When alone with Lu Xu, there were times when his tongue was quite sharp.

As Qiu Yongsi had put it, the wolf’s tail—once carefully tucked away in a show of modesty—had finally shown itself.

None of the members of the Department of Exorcism were in the habit of gossiping about their colleagues behind their backs. They were all worldly young men; it didn’t matter who visited Pingkang Ward, or who

was in a relationship with whom. As long as Mergen came back, he would be treated like family. Nothing else mattered.

In any case, what was Li Jinglong there for, if not to worry about things on their behalf?

Chapter 122:
Broken Promises

MERGEN WIPED HIS HANDS and stacked the clean dishes. Lu Xu, after finishing his own chore, took a seat outside Hongjun's room, waiting for him to wake up. Instead of going out, Mergen settled down next to him.

"Where do you think Xie Yu's hiding?" Lu Xu asked, lost in thought.

"Probably some pond. Qiu Yongsi will figure out how to find him."

"Hongjun said the Department of Exorcism will be shut down once it completes its mission and the human realm is at peace. Is that true?"

Mergen looked down, pulling at the grass growing beneath the walkway. "It's not that it'll be shut down. We all have our own missions to complete. A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, and Turandokht have to leave to restore their nation, and Yongsi has to return to guard the Dragon-Quelling Tower. Everyone's busy with their own things."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Mergen's eyes were distant as he stared up at the white clouds dotting the sky. "I don't know. I'll probably head back to the grasslands."

Lu Xu waited a few beats. "Why don't you ask me?"

"You?" Mergen asked. "You'll probably stay in Chang'an."

"I'm going home," Lu Xu said dreamily, the corners of his mouth curved in a smile.

Mergen's brows twitched as Lu Xu continued, "I'll go back to where my parents lived—to that village at the base of the Qilian Mountains—and stay there for the rest of my life. Every morning, I'll push open the windows and see the far-off snowy mountains. I'll plant a bunch of trees there and go out hunting during the day. I'll trade my kills at the market for food to eat, and at night, I'll stay at home and paint."

"You'll go hunting?" Mergen repeated. "With what, a shovel?"

“It’s not like there’s anything in this world that can outrun me. It doesn’t matter how good your martial techniques are; nothing beats speed. I could hunt with just a kitchen knife if I wanted to.”

Mergen stared.

“If you’re free and happen to be in Liang Prefecture, you can come visit me,” Lu Xu said, earnest.

Mergen got to his feet and turned away in a huff.

“Hey, where are you going?” Lu Xu called.

“To work!”

Lu Xu leaned against the corridor railing. A short while later, Hongjun pulled open the door. Lu Xu looked up in surprise. “Hongjun!”

Hongjun was clutching a folding chair, which he’d used to support himself as he hobbled out. “I… I…”

Registering Lu Xu’s alarm, Hongjun gestured for him not to shout. “I’m going to die from hunger,” he said. “Get me something to eat…”

Lu Xu was speechless.

Li Jinglong was still lying spread-eagled on the bed, sound asleep, when Lu Xu peeked in a short while later. He brought a bowl of partially congealed noodles over to Hongjun, who scarfed it down despite the pain racking his body. Lu Xu helped him into the main hall and quietly filled him in on what he’d missed while he ate.

“I didn’t know Ashina Adarvan was such a good cook,” Hongjun said when he’d finished the bowl.

Lu Xu stared at him incredulously. Evidently, he really had been starving.

Setting down his bowl and chopsticks, Hongjun asked, “What you said just now—is it true?”

“It’s true,” Lu Xu confirmed before launching into the full story of what had happened between him and Mergen—something he’d put off while Hongjun was injured.

Hongjun stared at him, flabbergasted. “I told you it hurts,” he managed at last.

“It was all right,” Lu Xu said, reluctant to show any weakness.

“If it was ‘all right,’ then Mergen-ge must be quite small?” Hongjun said.

Lu Xu hesitated; it wouldn’t be right to slander Mergen. He had no choice but to admit, “Okay, it hurt a lot.”

But before Hongjun could congratulate him, he continued, “Oddly enough, I think I’ve come to terms with things staying like this.”

“They won’t,” Hongjun assured him. “You’ll be together for a very, very long time, just like the chief and me. We’ll all be happy.”

The divine kun’s prophecy hadn’t come true—he was still alive—which meant that something must have changed. Hongjun’s fury had already faded, and it hadn’t taken five or ten years. His love for Li Jinglong deepened with every day they spent together, and although he said he was angry, in his heart, all he wanted was for them to spend the rest of their lives entwined.

He believed Lu Xu felt the same about Mergen—if only Mergen could figure out his own feelings.

They talked until dusk, at which point Li Jinglong finally rejoined the world of the living. He bolted up in a panic and searched frantically for Hongjun until he found him with Lu Xu in the hall. Only then did he sigh in relief and drag himself to the rear courtyard to wash up.

The other exorcists trickled in one by one. A-Tai must have complained, because Turandokht brought over specially prepared boxes of food for each member of the department out of concern that they were starving themselves.

Hongjun’s injuries were healing quickly. Although his body still hurt, he could move around with a little effort. To celebrate, Li Jinglong set up a simple banquet that evening and invited Turandokht to stay.

“All right,” he said, looking around. “Our people are all present and accounted for!”

An extra box of food sat on the table before an empty chair. Hongjun felt a wave of sadness as he remembered once again that the carp yao was gone.

"I said *people*," Li Jinglong amended. "I didn't count the fish. Don't worry, Zhao Zilong will be back. When have I ever broken a promise to you?"

Hongjun felt a bit better at that, but he still glowered at Li Jinglong, as if to say, *I'm not through with you yet, so don't get all smug with me.*

Mergen poured himself a cup of wine. "Since the boss isn't here, why don't you close the case for us?"

Li Jinglong drew a deep breath and let a smile spread over his face. "Case closed. Tomorrow, the Department of Exorcism will depart for West Lake to escape the summer heat!"

"Really?!" Hongjun exclaimed, breaking the stunned silence around the table. "Hooray! Aiya, it hurts…"

Lu Xu hurried to steady Hongjun. "Don't overexert yourself," he admonished.

Qiu Yongsi chuckled. "So you're all coming home with me?"

"I depart for Yang Prefecture in the third month amid willow catkins and spring flowers in full bloom,"[5] Li Jinglong recited. "Granted, it's already almost summer, but we can spend a full month traveling and visit Hang Prefecture, Su Prefecture, and Yang Prefecture along the way."

Hongjun's heart sank as he turned to Qiu Yongsi. "You're leaving?"

"Qiu Yongsi has an errand to run back home," Ashina Adarvan said.

"Ye Ming's ashes must be returned to the tower," Qiu Yongsi explained. "I owe everyone thanks this time around. That hourglass Xie Yu was using contained the dragon's ashes. Back when Ye Ming was alive, time flowed at a different pace within the Dragon-Quelling Tower—that's what kept the dragons and jiao imprisoned. Ever since Xie Yu escaped with them, the tower has been in danger of collapsing. Now we can finally breathe a sigh of relief."

"We still need to catch him and bring him back to the tower," Li Jinglong said.

“After the damage you did to him, it’ll take him at least a hundred years to recover,” Qiu Yongsi responded. “We’ll catch him.”

“It was thanks to everyone’s efforts,” Li Jinglong said hastily.

“Especially mine!” Ashina Adarvan piped up. “Do you know how exhausting it is, pretending to be a corpse?”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“You’ve all worked hard this time,” Li Jinglong said when the laughter died down. “Even though things turned out a bit differently than we expected, we’ve still solved two major problems—we’ve managed to retrieve a spiritual device capable of altering time, and we’ve severely wounded Xie Yu. Plus, An Lushan has fled Chang’an.”

“We also recovered the sacred flame,” A-Tai put in.

“That’s right,” Ashina Adarvan said. “At our current strength, there’s nothing for us to fear anymore.”

“It’s still better to be cautious,” Li Jinglong said with a laugh. “We can’t fail now.”

“We still haven’t dealt with An Lushan permanently,” Mergen agreed.

Everyone nodded. “I know you all have your own lives to live and your own business to attend to,” Li Jinglong began, “but seeing as we’ve already come this far together, please allow me to make a presumptuous request…”

He looked around expectantly; everyone hastily told him to go ahead.

“Stay with the department for another half year,” Li Jinglong said. “In that time, we’ll track down An Lushan—ideally by luring him out of Fanyang—and exorcise him once and for all. With that, the greatest mission of the Department of Exorcism will be complete. Even after we go our separate ways, we’ll gather when we can—the Department of Exorcism will always be our home.”

Li Jinglong raised his cup in a toast. As everyone mimicked him, he turned to Hongjun with a lift of his brows, his eyes sparkling, as if Hongjun was the only one present.

Hongjun's heart immediately began to race. At that moment, he both loved and hated Li Jinglong, so much so that he wanted to grind his teeth. *Well, aren't you a tough guy now,* he thought. *Not only can you summon gods, you're a marquis of the realm too. I can't best you in a fight or even beat you in an argument.*

"What if yao come to Chang'an again?" Lu Xu asked.

"Hongjun and I will stay in Chang'an for a while," Li Jinglong answered. "Perhaps we'll travel the world someday for the purpose of exorcising yao throughout the nation. We'll have to return to Chang'an every year to report on our work. If you guys want, come home once a year to see us."

"Did I ever agree to that?" Hongjun asked.

Everyone snickered; it was high time someone cut Li Jinglong down to size.

Li Jinglong had already had a few cups of wine. He slurred slightly as he said, "Then you tell me—where do you want to go? Wherever you go, I'll follow. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

Everyone promptly began to heckle him. Hongjun hadn't expected Li Jinglong to be so open in front of the others, but then again, this was nothing compared to the day he had boldly declared his love for Hongjun in front of the whole department.

"I'll stay in Chang'an," Mergen said. "It's not like my tribe needs me. I won't be going back."

From Hongjun's look of surprise, Li Jinglong guessed at once that Mergen and Lu Xu were having another one of their tiffs. "In that case, we'll count on you to look after the house," he said with a smile.

Sensing that the atmosphere had become slightly awkward, Qiu Yongsi steered the conversation toward other topics. Yet it wasn't long before they heard a knock at the door—to everyone's surprise, it was Li Bai and Li Guinian. Li Jinglong hurried over to welcome them in and offer them a drink.

After several rounds of toasts, chatter and laughter filled the department headquarters. The Department of Exorcism had never been

happier. Qiu Yongsi had recovered the spiritual device he'd been seeking, A-Tai had acquired the sacred flame Atar for his nation, and the gray wolf had at last found the white deer. Li Guinian plucked his pipa and began to sing Li Bai's new work, set to "The Song of Tranquility":

"The clouds are her robes, and the flowers her countenance; spring winds skim the balustrades as dew stains the peony, its colors vibrant;

If she is not a celestial maiden of Mount Qunyu, then she must be a divine goddess, cast in moonlight before Yao Terrace…"[6]

Hongjun couldn't help wishing Zhao Zilong were here with them. He would surely strike the wine cups with a chopstick in each hand and perform a rousing dance to accompany the music.

In the dead of night, the sound of harsh panting came from midway down a sheer cliff, over which a waterfall crashed into a deep pool. Something flickered in and out of sight in the dimness—Xie Yu's enormous body lay at the edge of the pool, dark green blood spilling from his wounds to dye the ground.

He flipped over laboriously, washing his bloody gashes in the clear water. What little remained of his demonic energy was slowly dissipating into the air. His jiao body had been burned black by golden fire, and his eyes gleamed with green light when he blinked. Li Jinglong's Sword of Wisdom had missed his heart—which lay beneath his reverse scale, the most vulnerable point on his body—by a mere foot. It was only through sheer luck that he had survived.

The carp yao held a wooden stick with a loofah attached to the end, which he was using to scrub Xie Yu's sinuous body.

A wave of agony rippled through Xie Yu when the sponge came into contact with his wounds. He whipped his head around and roared at the carp yao.

The carp yao shook like a leaf, his hands faltering.

"Keep going," Xie Yu said after a moment, his voice subsiding to a low rumble.

But the carp yao didn’t resume his scrubbing. “Xie Yu… You… When will you…”

“If you kill me now,” Xie Yu cut in, his voice like muted thunder, “and swallow my inner core, you might be able to become a dragon. Would you like to try?”

The carp yao would never dare kill Xie Yu, even if he had nerves of steel. Xie Yu continued, “Or perhaps you could bring those mortal exorcists you’re so fond of here and have them do it for you?”

Clutching the scrubber, the carp yao took a step back, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled for words. At last, staring at Xie Yu in a daze, he said, “You lied to me.”

“Fish really are brainless,” Xie Yu murmured, snaking his head around to study the carp yao. “You’ve only just realized this?”

“You promised you wouldn’t hurt Hongjun!” the carp yao exclaimed.

Xie Yu scoffed once before turning away and closing his eyes.

The carp yao was trembling now. “You said once you removed his demon seed, you would spare him!”

Xie Yu couldn’t be bothered to explain himself to this insignificant ant of a yaoguai. He kept his eyes closed, continuing to breathe slowly.

The carp yao had been deceived and humiliated. He had lost the warm camaraderie of the Department of Exorcism, and to make matters worse, he still couldn’t transform into a dragon to show off before his former companions. Disappointment and anger curdled in his heart until finally, he erupted.

“Liar!” the carp yao roared. Emboldened by his anger, he raised the back scrubber and charged at Xie Yu, using what little strength he had to express the indignation that raged within him like the sea. He struck and jabbed at Xie Yu with the back scrubber as he shouted, “Liar! Liar!”

When Xie Yu judged the carp yao had screamed at him long enough, he opened his eyes, turning to look at him in irritation. The carp yao immediately backed away, regarding Xie Yu with caution.

Xie Yu opened his mouth. Zhao Zilong waited for his scolding, only to jump as Xie Yu breathed a mouthful of fire.

The jiao's breath turned half of the water in the pool to steam and collided with the carp yao with a thunderous *boom*, searing his scales black. Xie Yu flicked his tail out a second later, sending the carp yao crashing into a slab of rock. Casually, Xie Yu knocked the carp yao back into the air and struck a final blow. His tail hit the carp yao with the force of a hammer, sending him into a spin as he plunged down the towering cliff.

The carp yao made no sound as he plummeted through the air and splashed into a stream at the foot of the mountain. A long while later, he floated to the surface, bobbing belly-up among the leaves and broken branches as he was washed downstream.

Despite having no memory of returning to his room, when Hongjun opened his eyes the next morning, he found himself pressed against Li Jinglong. The day had already started to warm. It was too hot to sleep plastered together like this, but Li Jinglong clung to him fiercely, as if he wanted to glue himself to Hongjun.

Hongjun shoved him aside. "I'm banning you from my room for three days as punishment!"

Li Jinglong blinked awake. For the first time in his life, the light of dawn set him at ease; all his past pressures had been relieved overnight. He hazily remembered drinking too much wine and then proceeding to apologize to Hongjun, shouting things like, *My dearest wife, please have mercy!*

He smiled at Hongjun. "It's been days since we last did it. You owe me several rounds, so I'd say we're even."

"You sure about that?" Hongjun asked.

A sudden clamor came from Mergen's room next door. Li Jinglong gave Hongjun a supporting hand as they both staggered out to take a look, poking their heads out just in time to see Lu Xu unceremoniously yank open the door and dash out. He strode away without a backward glance, naked but for an outer robe draped over his shoulders, which he hastily pulled closed and secured with a belt.

As for Mergen, he didn't have a stitch on him as he stood there like a leopard, his muscular body on full display.

"*You're* the one who came to my room when I was drunk last night. Don't even think about blaming this on me!" he shouted after Lu Xu.

Lu Xu glanced over his shoulder. "You were drunk last night, but what about this morning? What, can't get enough?"

Li Jinglong waved a hand at Mergen. "Put on some clothes."

Hongjun laughed and ran after Lu Xu.

"We'll take another day off today and head over to the palace this afternoon," Li Jinglong said over breakfast. "I need to make my report to His Majesty and the crown prince in person."

As soon as they heard they were going to the palace, everyone pushed their bowls away; even Hongjun lost his appetite. It was strange. The food, which had tasted halfway decent yesterday, was suddenly utterly unpalatable.

That afternoon, a messenger came to summon them, just as Li Jinglong had predicted. The members of the Department of Exorcism mounted their horses and rode for Xingqing Palace.

After so many attempts, Li Longji and Li Heng had succeeded at summoning Li Jinglong for a meeting. By this point, the sovereign could hardly even muster true anger anymore.

"His Majesty summons you to Gold Blossom's Fall," a eunuch announced when they arrived. Li Jinglong led the exorcists in.

Cicadas chirped in the cooling breeze. Although it was summer, it was surprisingly temperate inside Gold Blossom's Fall. The verdant leaves of the ginkgo tree were on exuberant display, growing in luxuriant profusion overhead. On the orders of Noble Consort Yang, the table had been set with pastries of all shapes and sizes.

Following the incident at Daci'en Temple, Li Longji had guessed what had happened even without Li Jinglong's explanation. After all, it had been Hongjun, Li Bai, and Li Guinian who had defeated the apparition of Wu Zhao. Li Guinian had also spent the past several days hinting to Li Longji that many more troubles would have arisen if not for the Department

of Exorcism—for starters, the Yang family could very well have been ousted overnight.

Li Heng, by contrast, seemed furious as he watched Li Jinglong enter.

The moment Li Jinglong stepped over the threshold, however, he heard a familiar voice.

“With the repetition of the water trigram, danger will manifest in its entirety. Great Tang will encounter the pinnacle of this danger in the near future. The road ahead is littered with obstacles. Only by flowing like water will one find an opportunity for a favorable turn.”

The speaker was a pale man dressed in black robes with a dark strip of cloth covering his eyes. His fair fingers moved lightly over the table as he set out several pieces of a tortoise shell, swept a hand over them, then collected them once more.

Yuan Kun.

On the banks of a stream, a handful of children were fishing for wrigglers beneath the brilliant sunshine.

“Look, a fish!” one of them called out.

“Why does it have legs?!”

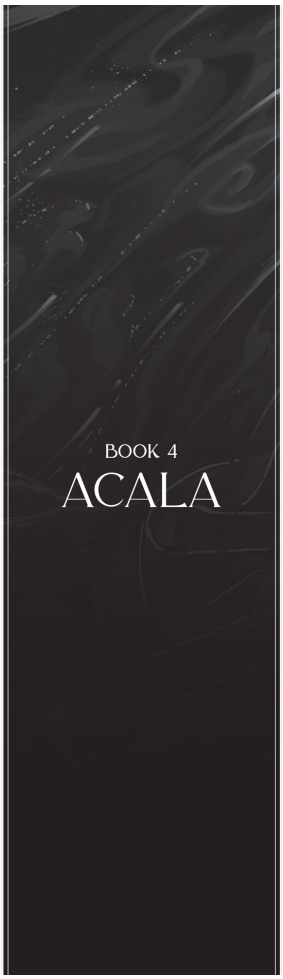
The carp yao floated down the stream on his back, surrounded by rotting twigs and leaves. The children exclaimed in surprise as they scooped him out of the water and used a tree branch to flip him over.

The carp yao’s open eyes were dull. Nearly half the scales on his body had been charred black, and many more had fallen off in patches, revealing his raw skin. His arms and legs hung limply at his side, and flies buzzed around him, stinging his body, which had begun to take on a distinctly pungent odor.

“It smells,” one child said.

“A fish with legs,” another child said. “It’s scary—throw it back.”

“We can sell it in the market!” yet another child said. “These sorts of monsters are worth *tons* of money!”


BOOK 4
ACALA

Chapter 123:
Imminent Calamity

Gaze back upon Chang'an and see mountains like brocade piles;
Where the thousand doors of Huaqing Palace open one at a time;
A horseman rides through red dust, and the consort smiles;
Who knew 'twas a gift of lychees from the southern coastline…[7]

"HUH? WHAT'RE THOSE?" Hongjun's eyes were drawn to a pile of white fruit in a crystal bowl on the table. Nestled in cubes of ice, the fruit glistened with a luminous sheen, exuding a pleasant chill in the scorching heat. Sitting beside the bowl was a small dish of salt water for dipping.

"Lychees," Li Jinglong whispered. "Go ahead and try them, but be quiet."

A grim silence settled over Gold Blossom's Fall as Yuan Kun finished collecting the oracle shells on the table.

"Gao Lishi personally invited this master to divine the fate of our nation of Great Tang," Li Longji said.

Li Jinglong shot Yuan Kun a glance, wondering how he'd become acquainted with the Chief Eunuch, Gao Lishi. But a moment later he realized—although Li Longji was getting on in age, he wasn't senile. With all that had happened in recent years, he must have detected the subtle warning of impending catastrophe beneath Great Tang's flourishing facade.

In a matter of seconds, Li Jinglong had deduced what must have transpired. In his mind's eye, he saw Yuan Kun entering Chang'an in the days following Xie Yu's escape with his shop banners in hand, encountering Gao Lishi by happy chance, and being brought before the Son of Heaven. Given what Li Jinglong knew about the divine kun's understanding of the inscrutable twists of fate and his ability to see the future, this was more than a conversation between a yao king and a mortal sovereign. It was a hint that things might not be over yet.

“What calamities await Great Tang?” Li Longji asked.

“Thunder and lightning; a violent storm.” Yuan Kun flicked his sleeves, and Gold Blossom’s Fall plunged into darkness. Everyone looked around as the room shook with peals of thunder. Yuan Kun’s voice suddenly sounded right in Hongjun’s ear.

“Meet me at Xingjiao Temple tonight at midnight. Don’t turn around. Eat your lychees.”

In the pitch darkness of Gold Blossom’s Fall, monstrous shadows leapt across the enormous folding screen, transforming into the scene of a great war. The screams of horses echoed in the room as black clouds rolled across the sky of the screen. Pools of crimson grew into a sea of blood that submerged Gold Blossom’s Fall in an instant. The members of the Department of Exorcism gazed steadily at the screen. Li Heng was first to lose his composure, nearly crying out in alarm, but Li Longji’s eyes never wavered even as he reached out and pressed a hand to his son’s knee.

As quickly as it had appeared, the scene vanished, and Gold Blossom’s Fall returned to its original state.

A tense silence followed. At last, a clear voice piped up:

“Are there any more lychees?”

Hongjun had already polished off the entire bowl.

The corner of Li Longji’s mouth twitched. Li Heng said, “I’ll have someone fetch some more—but…”

“When will this disaster strike?” Li Longji asked, his voice grave. He looked toward Yuan Kun, but the man had already disappeared. After a long moment of silence, Li Longji sighed.

“He’s gone,” Li Jinglong said.

Li Longji sat in a daze. Meanwhile, Hongjun was only thinking about how delicious the lychees were and eagerly awaiting the next bowl. He stared hopefully at Li Heng. But why would he care about lychees right now when his nation was on the verge of collapse?

At last Li Longji seemed to collect himself; he’d asked about the fate of the nation, only to receive a dire answer. “We asked you all to come here today…to ask you if that fortune teller’s predictions are true.”

“I know him,” Li Jinglong said. “Of the predictions he’s made, none have come true… No, perhaps I should say only one has come true so far.”

“Which one?” Li Heng asked.

“It concerns my fate,” Li Jinglong answered. “It’s a complicated matter that I can’t explain in detail right now.”

Hongjun looked up at Li Jinglong in surprise, his mind working. Indeed, since the divine kun’s first appearance, none of his predictions had really come to pass.

“However, I believe it is good to be prepared,” Li Jinglong said easily. “What Master Yuan spoke of just now is connected to the various strange events that have recently transpired in our capital.”

Li Jinglong had been worried about convincing Li Longji of the unbelievable truth: that his Right Chancellor Yang Guozhong was a yaoguai, and that his military governor An Lushan was a demon who wanted to overthrow the dynasty. Whether or not it was his intent, Yuan Kun had laid the groundwork for his explanation, which made things much easier.

He quickly sorted out his thoughts and began with the story of the black jiao Xie Yu’s fight with the phoenix two hundred years ago. He then moved on to Xie Yu’s takeover of Chang’an, explaining how the nine-tailed celestial fox’s schemes were part of his grand plot.

Although Li Heng was stunned, Li Longji had heard Li Jinglong obliquely refer to these matters before and merely listened quietly. Li Jinglong continued, explaining the corpse-ghost case that had taken them to the northwest and the haunting of the imperial mausoleums. It wasn’t until he brought up An Lushan that Li Longji at last lost his composure.

“An Lushan?!” Li Longji asked, staggered by this revelation.

Li Jinglong nodded slowly. “He’s fled to Fanyang.”

“So then—who is Xie Yu?”

“We have already driven Xie Yu away,” Li Jinglong answered truthfully.

This matter involved the chancellor of the nation. Li Jinglong didn’t dare reveal the truth rashly lest he raise a new wave of turmoil. Even so, the

hint was enough—Li Longji grasped his meaning immediately.

Finally, Li Jinglong detailed the events of the day of the noble consort's birthday, wrapping up the case. "That's all, Your Majesty," he said at last.

Gold Blossom's Fall once again descended into deathly silence.

"We still remember," Li Longji began slowly, "the first time we saw Xie Yu, twenty years ago."

This time it was the exorcists' turn to be surprised. Li Longji had seen Xie Yu's true form?

"Did he speak to you?" The moment the words left his mouth, Li Jinglong realized he had spoken out of turn. Li Longji was the Son of Heaven; no matter what, as his subject, Li Jinglong shouldn't question him so presumptuously.

But Li Longji had no intention of reproaching him. "It was when we offered sacrifice to the heavens on the banks of the Wei River. That day, a mist rose over the river's surface, so thick we could hardly see our hand before our face. It was during a moment of distraction that we saw him. He told us…'I shall leave your kingdom to you for now. I will come to claim it when you…when you…'"

As Li Longji hesitated, everyone mentally finished the sentence for him: *I will come to claim it when you die.*

An ugly expression appeared on Li Heng's face.

"Our ministers all saw the black jiao sink into the water. In less than an hour, the mist dispersed," Li Longji said, his voice hoarse with age. "Everyone thought the black dragon was an auspicious omen. Only we recognized him as a harbinger of misfortune. Xie Yu never appeared before us again, but the experience always made us uneasy. In fact, it is why we reestablished the Department of Exorcism."

As he finished speaking, Li Longji leveled his gaze at Li Jinglong.

Finally it hit Li Jinglong—this was why the emperor had always been so tolerant of the Department of Exorcism.

Li Longji turned back to Li Heng. "We are tired. You discuss with Jinglong—determine together how to apprehend Guozhong and Lushan and

bring them back to Chang'an. There is a question we want to ask them."

So Li Longji was already certain that Yang Guozhong was Xie Yu. *You're the one who said it,* Li Jinglong thought. *I won't be taking responsibility if Noble Consort Yang asks about it.*

Li Longji was no fool. How could he not know, when the Right Chancellor had mysteriously disappeared right after such a major incident? As he rose to his feet, everyone noticed the Son of Heaven seemed much older than when they'd met him just last year at Huaqing Pool; his gait as he walked was unsteady in a way it'd never been before.

The emperor took his leave. Li Heng personally escorted the members of the Department of Exorcism to the Meridian Gate. Night had fallen while they were inside the palace. The cicadas had stopped their droning, and Chang'an had cooled pleasantly.

After recovering from his initial shock, Li Heng had come to realize that the present situation was rapidly tilting in his favor. His two greatest political opponents, An Lushan and Yang Guozhong, were both monsters whom Li Jinglong would soon be ordered to eliminate. Li Heng's days of triumph were at hand. He didn't have to worry anymore—as long as he set the board correctly, he could simply wait to inherit the imperial throne of Great Tang.

"For now, stay put and wait for my orders," Li Heng said. "Now that An Lushan's fled back to Fanyang, I doubt he'll simply surrender. The situation is delicate; there are several issues I need to deal with before we make our move. Otherwise, I fear we may invite a rebellion."

As the military governor of Hedong, Pinglu, and Fanyang, An Lushan had hundreds of thousands of soldiers under his command. If Li Heng and the exorcists didn't take appropriate measures before they severed the head of this snake, they could very well find themselves with a mutiny on their hands. It wasn't impossible that Yuan Kun's prophecy referred to Great Tang falling into civil strife following the death of An Lushan.

Li Jinglong stopped in his tracks. "Your Highness, we cannot afford to underestimate him. The demon must be exorcised as soon as possible."

The fact that Li Jinglong had seen through his intentions left Li Heng a bit awkward. "Of course, I know that."

Li Jinglong explained that he wished to take the members of the Department of Exorcism on an excursion to Hang Prefecture. Li Heng agreed without thinking. His gaze caught on Qiu Yongsi's tall figure at the back of the group. After studying him for a moment, he dismissed Li Jinglong and the others without asking any further questions.

The group made their way out of the palace. Li Jinglong stretched his limbs beneath the starry sky. With the warrant for his arrest now officially revoked, he was once again a free man. Finally all the troubles stemming from this case were put to rest. When he turned back, however, he was greeted by the complicated expressions of his comrades. It seemed they were all still mulling over the implications of the divine kun's prophecy.

"Why do you all look so gloomy?" Li Jinglong asked with a grin. "Cheer up. We're getting paid tomorrow, aren't we?"

Everyone nodded and forced themselves to smile.

Li Jinglong's expression turned serious. "I meant it. The divine kun's prediction might not be accurate."

"That's right," Qiu Yongsi agreed. "The future is in our hands."

"Even if there's a war, it'll probably be contained," Ashina Adarvan said. "I doubt it could spread through to the entirety of the Central Plains."

A-Tai shook his head. "There's no way."

Everyone was in agreement. It was better to assume some of the divine kun's words were true than to reject them all as false. If war broke out, fighting was inevitable; it was just a matter of scale.

"Ordinary mortals have their own battles to fight," Li Jinglong said. "Our only enemy is An Lushan. We'll leave the rest to the crown prince. Everyone get some sleep tonight; we set out first thing in the morning."

Everyone voiced their agreement.

Hongjun hadn't expected everything to happen so quickly. That night, when the members of the Department of Exorcism returned to headquarters to pack their bags, they found their reward waiting for them in the alleyway. This time, instead of promoting Li Jinglong, the emperor had sent a large quantity of money along with bundles of ready-made summer clothes.

Li Jinglong hastily knelt to receive the imperial decree. When he looked up, he was shocked to see that the person standing beside the eunuch who had come to read the document was none other than Noble Consort Yang.

“I heard Hongjun likes lychees, so I had them bring some over,” she said with a smile.

Li Jinglong had suspected Noble Consort Yang would come pay them a visit sooner or later. This was a rare case where even Li Jinglong didn’t know what he ought to do; he had thus planned to leave early the next morning to avoid her. He hadn’t expected her to be so eager to see him that she’d come tonight.

Now that she was here, he had no choice but to welcome her in. “This way please, Your Grace,” he said, leaving the eunuch delivering their reward outside to wait.

Curiosity piqued, the other exorcists gathered round to listen in. Lu Xu had never seen Noble Consort Yang before. He turned to Hongjun and whispered, “That’s the noble consort? She’s so beautiful.”

It was dark inside the Department of Exorcism; illuminated only by the moonlight streaming in, Noble Consort Yang appeared especially pure and untainted.

“She’s a really, really nice person. It’s just…” Hongjun trailed off with a sigh.

Although Li Longji hadn’t formally appointed her empress, Yang Yuhuan was honored as the mother of the nation. It seemed wrong to say that she was unfortunate—but then, both her elder sister and cousin had turned out to be yao. He could only guess what deity she must have offended to be afflicted with such bad luck.

“Go pack your bags,” Mergen said. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning. Come on everyone, stop eavesdropping.”

Lu Xu shot Mergen a withering look. Hongjun hadn’t spoken much with Mergen since his recovery. He hopped onto Mergen’s back, dug his heels into his sides, and shouted “Hyah!” Laughing, Mergen obligingly carried him away on long strides.

The night deepened. Hongjun didn’t have much to pack to begin with, and when he recalled that it had once been the carp yao who’d done his packing, he was overcome with another wave of sadness. Mergen sat outside the door, keeping him company. They chatted idly as Hongjun packed, Mergen turning to respond to him now and then as he worked.

Out of everyone in the Department of Exorcism, aside from Li Jinglong, Hongjun had always been closest to Mergen. Perhaps it was because, as the gray wolf, Mergen was also half yao; prior to meeting Lu Xu, Hongjun had felt a sense of kinship with him that no one else shared. But when Hongjun probed Mergen about Lu Xu now, he seemed reluctant to answer.

“So do you like him or not?” Hongjun asked, plopping down beside him with his bag in his arms.

“I do,” Mergen answered. “I know what that feels like now.”

“Then why won’t you tell him?” Hongjun gave him a shove. “Go tell him now. Go! You’ve already kissed him and done *that* with him—”

“It’s just that I can’t get over what he did,” Mergen said.

Hongjun stared at him, uncomprehending.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mergen said. He patted Hongjun on the head, then pushed him toward the door to get some rest. As he rose to take his leave, he added, “I know how to handle him.”

The corner of Hongjun’s mouth twitched. *Seriously?*

After Mergen left, Hongjun sat in the room alone, waiting for Li Jinglong to come to bed. But it seemed Noble Consort Yang had yet to leave, for Li Jinglong did not return. It was nearly midnight when Hongjun suddenly recalled his appointment with the divine kun. He stepped out of his room and made his way toward the front gate.

The moon was approaching its zenith, but the door to the main hall remained shut. No one had gone to bed yet. Mergen was speaking quietly to Lu Xu beneath the parasol tree in the courtyard. He stood with one hand braced against the tree trunk, while Lu Xu stared up at him coolly, a mocking twist to his mouth.

Both turned to look at Hongjun as he came out of his room.

Hongjun waved a hand for them to carry on, but Lu Xu straightened up. “Where are you going?”

“Xingjiao Temple.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mergen offered.

Lu Xu shot Mergen a look. Hongjun couldn’t fathom why these two were standing around chatting in the courtyard in the middle of the night when they could be kissing and hugging in their room.

“*I’ll* go with you,” Lu Xu said.

“In that case, let’s all go together,” Mergen countered.

Hongjun’s eyebrows rose—but he had a lot of questions for the divine kun, so after a moment, he nodded. Shifting into their animal forms, Mergen and Lu Xu stood a short distance apart, both waiting for him to climb on. Hongjun looked from one to the other, then clambered onto the white deer’s back. The gray wolf shook out his fur and scratched his ear with a hind leg before following them out of the Department of Exorcism.

They hadn’t gotten far when they ran into Qiu Yongsi, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan on their way back from shopping, their arms loaded with parcels of all sizes.

“Where are you guys off to?” Qiu Yongsi asked curiously.

Thus, three more were added to their party. Qiu Yongsi wanted to bring some local specialties from Chang’an back to Hang Prefecture. They wouldn’t have time to wait for the West Market to open the next morning, so he had followed A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan to the Merchants’ Guild.

The white deer pranced through the sky over Chang’an with Hongjun while the gray wolf loped through the streets with the other three on his back.

“You know why the big wolf offered to take you too?” Lu Xu said.

“Why?” Hongjun asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Because he knew I wanted an excuse to get away from him.”

Torn between laughter and tears, Hongjun asked, “Why are you being so stubborn when you both like each other?”

“It’s just that I’m still angry with him,” Lu Xu said.

When Hongjun had asked Li Jinglong about Lu Xu and Mergen, Li Jinglong had said, *Let them sort things out themselves. You probably shouldn't say too much.* Keeping this in mind, Hongjun tactfully refrained from commenting on Lu Xu and Mergen's awkward romance and rode the rest of the way in silence.

Chapter 124:
The Golden Buddha

THE MOON HUNG in the sky behind Xingjiao Temple, casting its mournful light over the surrounding trees. This late at night, all the lamps in the temple had been extinguished.

Moonlight streamed into the temple's main hall. Hongjun was still looking around when he heard the faint chime of a mallet striking the hanging sounding stone behind the building. A breeze picked up as Hongjun strode through the main hall toward the back, where he found a man standing before a nine-storied pagoda.

"Where is Li Jinglong?" Yuan Kun asked.

"Speaking with the noble consort," Hongjun responded.

"Just as well. Even if he came, I doubt he would listen. You see, this is why they say the workings of fate are filled with unexpected twists."

Hongjun took a few steps closer. "You left so suddenly the other day. There's still much I wanted to ask you."

In truth, Hongjun was less than pleased with the divine kun. After all, he was apparently the one who had taught Li Jinglong to ignite his true essence. If Hongjun hadn't interfered, Li Jinglong would very likely be dead.

"Tell your friends to come out," Yuan Kun said placidly. "This, too, is the work of fate."

It seemed they'd been caught. "Come out, everyone," Hongjun called.

The other exorcists emerged from all directions.

"Were you planning on exorcising me?" Yuan Kun asked.

Although Hongjun hurriedly assured him that wasn't the case, Yuan Kun had already discerned their positions from the taps of their footsteps. It was obvious they were in formation to surround him.

“You’re always so clueless about other people’s schemes,” Yuan Kun said. “I suppose it’s a good thing to approach others with a pure heart—but how many people in the world will treat you the same way?”

“We have no intention of exorcising you,” Lu Xu cut in. “Don’t sow discord, yaoguai.”

Hongjun hastily pacified Lu Xu. Any yao king had both a light and a dark side. The divine kun, the golden-winged great peng, and the phoenix Chong Ming all seemed to subtly disapprove of his human companions; they didn’t wish to befriend the Department of Exorcism, but they weren’t especially hostile either. But this very ambivalence made things difficult for Hongjun, caught in the middle.

Qiu Yongsi smiled. “The divine kun is a respected elder who was once a trusted companion of the great sage Zhuang Zhou. I wouldn’t dare cause the slightest offense. This very concern led me to conceal myself tonight.”

“If you were truly concerned with offending me, you would not have come at all,” Yuan Kun said coldly. “Forget it; this also concerns your fate.”

He turned back to Hongjun, who had just begun to realize that, given how smart his companions were, they had surely long been waiting for a chance to meet the divine kun.

“Your Majesty, there’s something I want to ask you,” Hongjun said.

Yuan Kun didn’t wait for him to finish. “That hairy-legged carp you’re always with—”

“That’s right!” This was exactly what Hongjun wanted to ask. “I only just found out that Zhao Zilong’s actually a…a…” He trailed off with a sigh.

“Yours was a fateful encounter long determined by the heavens—”

“Can he come back?” Hongjun cut in.

“Who is the divine kun, me or you?” Yuan Kun huffed. “Why don’t you do the talking, then, and I’ll listen?”

Hongjun snapped his mouth shut. Yuan Kun continued, “I asked you to come to Xingjiao Temple today because there is someone here with whom both of you share an unbreakable connection.”

He lifted a hand and tapped the pagoda. A golden glow began to emanate from the structure, and a hazy shadow dressed in a Buddhist kasaya appeared at its base.

In the stunned silence, Hongjun asked, “Huh? Who are you?”

Everyone else nearly fell over from exasperation.

The shadow resolved into the figure of a young monk. Light flickered over his dignified mien, revealing a face so astonishingly handsome it surpassed the entire Department of Exorcism in terms of attractiveness. In contrast to Hongjun’s exquisite good looks, this young monk possessed a rare beauty that exuded the majesty and holiness of a Buddha.

The monk turned to Hongjun. “You are the Peacock Wisdom King Mahamayuri?”

“I…” Hongjun had no idea how to respond. “I suppose I am.”

The monk nodded and stepped forward. “This humble monk’s name is Xuanzang.”

“Hi,” Hongjun said. He finally recalled that a monk by this name had saved the carp yao when he was in Chang’an seventy years ago. This must be the man himself.

“You’re Zhao Zilong’s savior.” Hongjun glanced behind him and started in surprise. The exorcists had all fallen to their knees, their heads bowed as if they didn’t dare look up. Even the divine kun had withdrawn to the periphery, where he sat down and pressed his palms together in greeting. “Uhh, guys? What are you doing?”

All the members of the Department of Exorcism came from prominent backgrounds and deemed most people beneath their notice—they’d barely bothered to greet the emperor when they first met him. But the monk standing before them was a Buddha. Hongjun was the only one who didn’t know Xuanzang’s impressive background. He stood there like an idiot, musing that this monk seemed rather powerful.

“I will not be lecturing about universal truths today, so please rise.” Xuanzang settled down on the ground as he spoke, and Hongjun followed suit, sitting cross-legged.

“That carp was someone of great stature in his previous life,” Xuanzang said, his expression solemn. “However, he defied heaven and earth, and ended up owing you a great debt. He has come to you in this life to repay that debt.”

“More like to take revenge!” Hongjun snapped in a rare show of anger. “How can you call what he did repaying a debt?”

“He has yet to overcome his heavenly tribulation,” Xuanzang replied. “This is the fate shared between the two of you.”

After a moment of thought, Hongjun admitted, “To be honest, I’ve already forgiven him.”

When Hongjun had woken up after the battle, Li Jinglong had explained that everyone in the Department of Exorcism had long felt that there was something off about Zhao Zilong. They had kept quiet about their suspicions and used Zhao Zilong to spread misinformation to Xie Yu. Everyone had been afraid that if they told Hongjun, he would accidentally give them away. This time, it had been a joint decision by the group, not Li Jinglong keeping things from him. And since the ultimate goal of the plan was to protect Hongjun, it hadn’t felt right to scold them. He could only let it go.

“Where’s Zhao Zilong now?” Hongjun asked. “I’m afraid Xie Yu will pick on him.”

“The fate you share has yet to run its course,” Xuanzang responded. “He will return once he has overcome his heavenly tribulation.”

Hongjun nodded, much relieved. Xuanzang’s image began to waver when Yuan Kun, sitting straight as a board, suddenly spoke up. “Golden Cicada, there is one more matter on which I wish to consult you.”

Xuanzang waited.

“Will there come a turning point in the chaos in the Divine Land?”

“Many things will come to pass, but in the end, good will always triumph over evil,” Xuanzang said slowly. “The wrathful manifestation of Mahavairocana will vanquish all demons.”

With that, he disappeared in a flash of golden light.

Everyone’s faces grew solemn. Hongjun had yet to make sense of Xuanzang’s final words; he was still thinking about the carp yao when Yuan Kun rose to his feet and made his way over to him.

After a few beats of silence, Mergen asked, “Does the divine kun intend to return to Chang’an?”

This was something the Department of Exorcism had always wanted to ask. Hongjun belatedly recalled that one of his tasks when he first descended the Taihang Mountains was to either expel or destroy Xie Yu so that Chong Ming could return to Chang’an and assume command of the human realm.

Now that Xie Yu had fled, Chang’an was a city without a master in the eyes of the yao. Although Yuan Kun rarely partook of such affairs, he was friends with Qing Xiong and quite clearly part of Yaojin Palace’s faction. Would Chong Ming really come back to Chang’an? And where was Qing Xiong now?

“We can discuss that later,” Hongjun said at once.

Hongjun’s last parting from Chong Ming at Yaojin Palace had been explosive—Chong Ming had been in a towering fury when he left. Nevertheless, he was increasingly sure that he needed to return to the Taihang Mountains soon to figure out the phoenix’s intentions regarding Chang’an.

“You would do better to worry about yourselves,” Yuan Kun said coolly. “Did you not hear what he said just now?”

“We did,” Mergen confirmed.

“What did he say?” Hongjun asked.

With a soft hum, Yuan Kun vanished into the night.

By the time they returned to the Department of Exorcism, Noble Consort Yang was gone. Li Jinglong sat in the study, updating their accounts. As everyone began dispersing to turn in for the night, he called out, “Come pick up your rewards before you go to bed.”

The remuneration this time far exceeded that of their previous missions. Li Longji had bestowed upon them a thousand taels of gold, to be

divided equally among them. After disbursing the money, Li Jinglong handed an extra portion to Lu Xu.

“What’s this for?” Lu Xu asked.

“Your dowry,” Li Jinglong replied.

Everyone burst into raucous laughter. Cheeks burning, Lu Xu said, “Give it to Mergen. I don’t need it.”

Late that night, Li Jinglong returned to his room and peeled lychees for Hongjun, listening as he recounted the events at Xingjiao Temple.

“Zhao Zilong is the secondary issue here,” Li Jinglong said after a moment of thought.

“He will come back, won’t he?”

“Of course he will,” Li Jinglong assured him. “But I think the divine kun’s purpose tonight wasn’t to inform you about Zhao Zilong, but to tell us that there is still hope.”

“How much faith can we put in some monk’s words?” Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong stared at Hongjun, who blinked back in confusion. Li Jinglong drew close to Hongjun’s ear and said with a chuckle, “My sweet wife. That was no monk. That was a Buddha.”

Hongjun was stunned silent.

“Forget it,” Li Jinglong said. “What are you doing, worrying so much? All your gege will take care of these annoying things. You just focus on your lychees.”

Under Li Jinglong’s care, Hongjun could feel himself getting stupider by the minute. He used to spend so much time trying to figure things out, but now, he hardly used his brain more than a few times a day.

“We’re going to Hang Prefecture tomorrow for our holiday,” Li Jinglong said. “If you can’t finish these now, eat them on the way. Now come on, let’s go to bed. I have another job for that mouth of yours.”

With that, he shoved Hongjun down into the blankets.

Early in the morning in a small village in Chencang District, a dozen villagers stood around the carp yao's body, clucking their tongues in wonder.

"Why does this fish have legs? Is it a monster?"

"It's been years since we've seen a monster in these parts."

"Should we bring it into town?"

"Hey now, my son was the one who found it," one of the villagers protested. "If we sell it, my family should get the money."

"Maybe we can try taking it to the market?" another villager suggested. If they really did manage to sell it, they could hire a Daoist priest to come dispel the bad luck, then use the remaining money to throw a feast.

The man whose son had found the carp gladly agreed. Someone fetched a hook and fastened it to the carp yao's upper jaw, and in no time, the carp was hung up for sale at the market. The marketgoers were all shocked by the sight. But upon learning the sellers were asking forty taels of silver for the strange fish, no one was willing to buy.

First of all, those were undoubtedly human arms and legs. It was rather frightful to think about stewing and eating it. Secondly, it was already dead, and therefore no longer fresh. Carp wasn't very tasty at the best of times, so if they bought it, it would only be to dry it and put it on display—and even then, it wouldn't make much of a decorative ornament. It was hardly worth the price.

A group of Shu merchants peddling embroidered textiles happened to be passing Chencang on their way through the Guanzhong region. The sight of the carp yao astonished them. The most curious among them promptly bought it in a fit of enthusiasm, only to regret it almost immediately. Perhaps he could present the creature to the emperor, but he had no idea if it would stay fresh until they reached Chang'an. Alternatively, he could cook it and eat it himself, but who knew whether the monster was poisonous. Besides, with those human hands and feet, it didn't look at all appetizing.

This Shu merchant was filthy rich; forty taels was nothing to him, so he didn't dwell on the matter. He instructed one of his assistants to salt the creature and store it in one of the carts for the time being. Once he reached Chang'an, he could see if there were any idiots willing to take it off his

hands. Salt was expensive, so the merchant's assistant didn't dare use too much: He carelessly stuck a talisman to the carp yao's head, rubbed a handful of salt on its body, then tossed it in the corner of a cart next to a cage crammed with a pair of golden pheasants from Sichuan.

Thunder rumbled overhead as the merchant caravan pulled out of Chencang. The storm caught them on the road. The merchant's assistants scrambled to toss oilcloths over the carts. Water fell in sheets, soaking the carp yao's body, and his gills began to flutter as he regained consciousness.

With a gasp, the carp yao snapped his eyes open. After flailing around, he managed to loosen his stiff arms enough to push himself upright. He looked around and spotted the pair of golden pheasants looking back at him.

"Where am I?" the carp yao mumbled to himself. "Ow ow ow… It hurts."

The carp yao's entire body throbbed with pain, and his charred scales were still falling off in patches. He gripped the edge of the cart and peered out.

"We've just left Chencang," one of the pheasants said.

The carp yao jumped in fright. "Yaoguai?!"

"Aren't you one too?" the other pheasant sneered. "The hell is wrong with you?"

The bird had a point. "You two… How did you end up here?"

"Are you blind?" the first pheasant asked. "Can't you see we're locked in a cage?"

"Are you both…male pheasants?" the carp yao asked in curiosity, recalling that male birds typically had more colorful plumage.

"What's it to you?" the second pheasant asked, voice sharp. "Are all members of the water clan so nosy?"

"Ahh, it hurts so much," the carp yao moaned. Both his mouth and body ached terribly, and he was starving to boot.

The hastily secured oilcloth was torn in several places. Rain leaked through in a steady stream, quickly soaking the pheasants until they looked

like a pair of drowned chickens. It was summer, but the rain was so cold that the birds soon began to shiver. Feathers drenched, they huddled together for warmth.

The rain seemed to wash the air in Chang'an clean as Li Jinglong led the Department of Exorcism toward Hangu Pass. Turandokht had handed the tavern over to her assistant for the moment and joined A-Tai for the trip. They followed the road between the green mountains to Luoyang, stopping at the Department of Exorcism's office there for a day of rest before making their way to the Grand Canal. It was midsummer on the Luo River waterway, and large ships came and went in an endless stream. From here, they could sail directly to Yang Prefecture.

"You sure you want to travel by boat again?" Hongjun asked Li Jinglong.

"It shouldn't be a problem," Qiu Yongsi cut in with a laugh. "Unlike the Yellow River, the waters of the Luo River and Grand Canal are quite gentle. Heh, besides, we're benefiting by association—only government officials are allowed to stay in such fine accommodations."

The waterway that connected the capital to Hang Prefecture was indeed much smoother than the Yellow River. At Qiu Yongsi's suggestion, they reserved the entire middle deck on a large vessel, which consisted of six beautifully appointed guest rooms. The ship weighed anchor, and the river breeze lifted the gauze curtains, dispelling the summer heat in an instant. The scenery on both banks was as picturesque as a painting. Traveling this way, it would only take them three days to reach Hang Prefecture.

When Hongjun had previously traveled with Li Jinglong, he had stayed in a cabin under the deck. This was his first time riding on a louchuan, which had multiple decks; he could hardly contain his excitement as Li Jinglong led him around on a meandering tour of the vessel. This large boat was typically reserved for dignitaries of the third rank and above traveling to places like the Su-Hang region or Luoyang. Li Jinglong had specially asked Li Heng for a written edict for its use, and, assuming that he was favored by the crown prince, the local officials treated him with utmost deference along the way.

Just as Qiu Yongsi had predicted, their journey along the Grand Canal was a peaceful one, with hardly any rough waters. They were treated to performances by girls who sang and played the pipa, and plied with all sorts of exquisite snacks. During the day, the exorcists gathered in the spacious main hall, where those who wished to read or look at the scenery could do as they pleased. It was a carefree and relaxing journey.

Hongjun sat before the railing, gazing at the verdant mountains on both sides of the canal while Li Jinglong drank tea at a table beside him. Mergen and A-Tai examined a stack of paper and maps nearby. They had been poring over these documents for several days now. A-Tai had even stuffed several ancient tomes written in Persian into his luggage, which he brought out and flipped through from time to time.

At last, Hongjun's curiosity got the better of him. "What are you guys looking at?"

Mergen's brow creased. "We're trying to figure out what these symbols mean. Do you recognize any of them?"

A-Tai flipped through the sheafs of paper and held one up for Hongjun, who shook his head.

"What about this one?" A-Tai asked.

"They don't resemble Uyghur or Tibetan script. If you ask me, they're not any language at all," Turandokht said.

"They must be," A-Tai said. "They can't be spiritual seals; we've already tested them."

"Well why don't we test them again?" Turandokht asked, hands on her hips.

A-Tai promptly changed his tune. "Yes ma'am, you're absolutely correct! They're not language!"

Turandokht finally dropped the matter; Hongjun didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Chapter 125:
Past Relics

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the room, Lu Xu, Ashina Adarvan, and Qiu Yongsi huddled together over a small spiritual device. Hongjun motioned for Mergen to go keep Lu Xu company. Mergen glanced over, a stick of charcoal held between his lean fingers, and waved his hand lightly. *Later*.

"Are these the symbols you got from that merchant? What happens once we figure out what they mean?" Hongjun asked.

"If we can read them, we can track down the remaining five artifacts of Acalanatha," Mergen replied.

Hongjun turned to Li Jinglong, who was still sitting straight-backed at his table, sipping tea. "Aren't you going to brainstorm with us too, Jinglong?"

"I already looked into them, but I didn't get anywhere," Li Jinglong answered. "There's no point racking your brains if you ask me. Can't find answers if there aren't any to begin with. It'll come when it comes."

"I can't relax until we figure it out," Mergen said.

Qiu Yongsi turned back to grin at Mergen. "You're like a eunuch getting worked up on the emperor's behalf. Look, even the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha himself isn't worried."

"How can I leave you all in good conscience if we don't figure this out?" A-Tai replied with a chuckle.

This wasn't the first time Hongjun had found his companions studying these symbols since they'd returned from Xingjiao Temple a few days ago. "Maybe we can ask the master of the Merchant Guild about it again once we're back in Chang'an?"

After An Lushan fled Chang'an, Hanguo Lan had quietly returned to the Merchant Guild—no one had even noticed that their leader had been temporarily replaced by an impostor.

To Hongjun’s surprise, Li Jinglong rejected the idea. “Let’s not. I don’t want to do business with him.”

Li Jinglong could do most things well, but there was one skill he’d never mastered. Accustomed as he was to spending taels of silver like copper coins, he was no good at bargaining with merchants and always got fleeced. Hanguo Lan had once swindled Li Jinglong of everything he had to his name just for a rusty old sword; one could only imagine the price now that he was trying to acquire five more artifacts.

“He has nothing more to tell us, anyway,” Ashina Adarvan said. “From what I know about him, the fact he remembered so much is remarkable already.”

Li Jinglong had suggested that the divine kun’s main objective the other day was to find out from Xuanzang how they could win the war. He’d merely used Hongjun’s bond with the carp yao as a starting point.

Xuanzang’s answer was this: *Good will always triumph over evil; the wrathful manifestation of Mahavairocana will vanquish all demons.* If good would win over evil, that must mean they’d prevail against An Lushan in the end.

The wrathful manifestation of Mahavairocana he referred to was, of course, none other than the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha. However, the Sword of Wisdom alone was not enough if they wanted to obtain Acalanatha’s powers in their entirety; the divine kun had already hinted that they’d have to gather all six artifacts.

This was why Mergen and the others were sifting through the clues they’d gotten from Hanguo Lan: five symbols that resembled the spindly script found on ancient oracle bones. These consisted of a gate with vertical lines through the middle; a simplistic drawing of what looked like an eye; a line curving upward topped with another arc, from which several short lines extended on both sides; a closed-off semicircle and a vertical line above it; and last of all, a meandering chain of jagged lines with some squiggles to the left that resembled flowing water. They’d sketched each one on its own paper, across the tops of which Qiu Yongsi had written the words *gate*, *eye*, *hill*, *moon*, and *river*, making it easier for them to discuss.

So much time had passed since the remaining five artifacts had last been seen. Hunting them down with nothing but these symbols to guide

them was a near impossible task.

Hongjun picked up the sheet of paper with the symbol resembling a gate. “This looks kind of like the symbol on the gates to Yaojin Palace. You don’t think an artifact could be hidden there, could it?”

“They look nothing alike,” Li Jinglong said. “The one on the gate at your home looks like this.”

Slightly more spirited now, he stepped over and drew the symbol representing the phoenix yao king Chong Ming on another sheet of paper. It was indeed quite different from the one Hongjun had picked out.

“This symbol looks like it has something to do with fire,” Mergen mused, poring over another sheet. “But it’s not Zoroastrian.”

A-Tai finished flipping through the book he was holding, then spread all five sheets on the table. “Each of these symbols represents a place.”

“How do you know just from looking at them?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I just do,” A-Tai answered, turning to Li Jinglong. “Why don’t you take another stab at it, then? I’m stuck.”

“I don’t think he actually knows anything,” Hongjun said to Li Jinglong, a grin on his face.

Li Jinglong flicked Hongjun a look of amusement before sitting down and spreading the papers further apart on the table. Qiu Yongsi, Lu Xu, and Ashina Adarvan stopped what they were doing and crowded over, as if they sensed Li Jinglong was about to begin a lecture. Even Turandokht turned to look at him, eyes alight with curiosity.

“I can’t figure out what the symbols mean either,” Li Jinglong said. “But if we look at this the way I usually approach a case, maybe we can glean some information about their origin.”

Everyone listened attentively. This was Li Jinglong’s first time taking them through his deduction process, so they didn’t dare interrupt.

“First, these five symbols came from somewhere,” Li Jinglong began. “Whether they’re language or something else, they must have been documented at some point.”

“That was one of the questions we asked ourselves too: Who originally recorded them?” A-Tai said.

Hongjun was beginning to vaguely grasp Li Jinglong’s train of thought.

“Whoever it was, we can be sure he was illiterate. If he could write, why wouldn’t he have left an explanation instead of these symbols?” Li Jinglong continued solemnly. “When someone who can’t write wants to communicate an idea on paper, what does he do?”

“Draw,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “He would draw something simple.”

“Something as simple as these symbols?”

A-Tai shook his head. “No.”

“If someone can’t write but wants to leave a record, they don’t do so with neat inscriptions. Instead they might use a combination of pictures and lines. For example, if we wanted to convey a message like ‘the box is buried on the northern side of the mountain,’ maybe we would draw a square representing the box, then a triangle for the mountain. We could connect the two with lines and draw a circle representing the sun behind the mountain. But the symbols we’re trying to decode all exist independently of each other; they don’t connect into any message we can see. If the person who drew them was illiterate, he wasn’t trying to use them together to convey meaning,” Li Jinglong concluded.

Everyone sank into thought. “Which means,” Qiu Yongsi said, “that these five symbols were preexisting; they weren’t created by the person who recorded them.”

Li Jinglong nodded. “For instance, what if the person who left them saw these symbols wherever it is that the artifacts are sealed and copied them down?”

“That makes sense.” Lu Xu immediately grasped Li Jinglong’s meaning. This would explain why the clues were neither more complex drawings nor explanatory text.

“These symbols, whatever they are, must be carved somewhere,” Li Jinglong said. “On a rock, perhaps, or in a temple. When we find the

corresponding symbols, we'll also have found where the artifacts are sealed."

"There's no point looking for their meaning in books, then," A-Tai said.

"Another thing we can be certain of: Duke Di learned of the artifacts' whereabouts through a copy of those symbols, not through oral descriptions of what they looked like," Li Jinglong continued. "*And* whomever Duke Di acquired this copy from must have already been long gone by the time Duke Di received them."

The group nodded—Di Renjie wouldn't have left such cryptic clues if he'd had more information.

"Where did Duke Di first encounter these symbols, then?" Li Jinglong asked. "*That* is the answer we need."

"We have no way of knowing," Mergen said, brows knit in a frown. "It would have been decades ago."

"Which leads me to my final question: How did Duke Di know these symbols were related to the six artifacts of Acalanatha?"

This might be the most crucial clue of all.

Struck by a bolt of inspiration, Hongjun blurted, "Because he found one of them!"

The gang was astounded. No one had expected Hongjun, of all people, to be the first to figure it out.

"That's right." Li Jinglong was surprised too. "That's the only possible answer."

There were no records of these symbols to be found in the historical texts, and Di Renjie, unlike their chief, hadn't bought the Sword of Wisdom from any merchant—a record of the transaction would have existed in the Department of Exorcism if that were the case. That left one explanation: Di Renjie had somehow traced the artifacts and managed to locate one of them.

Hongjun was dumbfounded. *How did I become so smart all of a sudden?*

He was usually the one most confused when the other exorcists made their deductions. All his companions tended to be brief in their exchanges, only touching on the most important points. Li Jinglong didn't even need to finish his sentence for the others to follow his thought to its conclusion; sometimes they would even communicate solely through meaningful glances, leaving Hongjun flummoxed. But whenever Li Jinglong did lay everything out clearly, as he had this time, Hongjun had no problem following his train of thought. He wasn't stupid—he just wasn't accustomed to how the others went about things.

"Duke Di didn't leave any records of his discovery, though," Mergen said. "We've already combed through everything he left behind."

"Then there are two possibilities. One, the records were destroyed; two, he purposely chose not to write anything down," Li Jinglong replied. "Which is more likely, do you think?"

"Yang Guozhong," Qiu Yongsi said. At first, Hongjun didn't see how this was an answer to Li Jinglong's question, but then he understood: Perhaps Di Renjie *had* left records behind, but they'd been deliberately destroyed by Yang Guozhong—Xie Yu—who was trying to resurrect Mara and therefore wished to bury any clues about the artifacts.

Li Jinglong nodded, humming in agreement. If this was true, it led them to even more questions. When did Yang Guozhong learn Di Renjie possessed information about the artifacts' whereabouts—before Li Jinglong got his hands on the Sword of Wisdom, or after? How long had he monitored Li Jinglong? Why didn't he take the sword, despite observing Li Jinglong for so long?

These, however, were all questions for another time.

"Xie Yu must know what the symbols mean," Mergen said.

"But he'd never tell us," Li Jinglong replied. "And after last time, unless we both have something to offer, I don't want to make any more deals with him."

"There's another way," said A-Tai.

Qiu Yongsi hummed in assent. "If we know where Duke Di traveled when he was alive, and when, we can retrace his steps."

Di Renjie had lived till the ripe age of seventy. He'd worked as a bailiff to the commandant in Bing Prefecture before going on to serve in the imperial court, first as a secretary general in the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, then as a member of the Imperial Censorate and a director in the Ministry of Revenue. Afterward, he was briefly the prefect of Ning Prefecture before being summoned back to court to serve as the Deputy Minister of Works and Right Minister of the Pavilion of Culture and Prosperity. Later still, he was appointed prefect of Yu Prefecture and Fu Prefecture, then promoted to the adjutant to the prefect of Luo Prefecture—and even then, there was more to his career.

Given the sheer number of places he'd traveled over the course of his life, retracing his steps was easier said than done.

"Maybe Duke Di kept a diary?" Hongjun said.

"His diaries have long been lost," Li Jinglong replied. "But I think we can narrow down an approximate time frame."

Qiu Yongsi tapped his fan against his hand, grinning. "No one could do it but you, Chief."

Li Jinglong chuckled. Noticing Hongjun's confusion, he explained, "I'm guessing he discovered those symbols just a few years before he founded the Department of Exorcism."

"Of course!" Hongjun exclaimed.

The Department of Exorcism had been established during the Shengong era, when Di Renjie was appointed chancellor of the nation for the second time. This date was clearly noted in their case files. A year before that, he was putting down a rebellion in You Prefecture, and in the five years prior, he'd been demoted to district magistrate of Pengze.

"You Prefecture…" Mergen mused. "That's Fanyang. Are we making a trip to An Lushan's turf?"

"Or it could be in Pengze," Li Jinglong replied. "Either way, we'll focus on these two locations first."

"I don't get it," Ashina Adarvan said. "If Di Renjie already went to one of these locations and removed the Sword of Wisdom, is there any point in us going there again?"

“There is,” Li Jinglong said. “I’m guessing all the places the artifacts are sealed will share similar characteristics. Wherever the Sword of Wisdom was buried—a mausoleum, an ancient ruin, a temple—it should, to some extent, give us a clue what to look for if we want to find the rest.”

Understanding dawned on everyone. Hongjun finally realized why Li Jinglong always looked so composed. He was always thinking a step ahead, keeping the whole picture in mind—so he never feared any sudden changes.

Since the chief had a plan, the exorcists wasted no more time worrying about it. After their vacation in Hang Prefecture, Li Jinglong explained, they would split into two groups and head to Pengze District and You Prefecture to continue their investigation.

“It’ll be a long time before we return to Chang’an,” Li Jinglong said with a smile. “Anyone who wants some fun while we’re out should take advantage of this opportunity.”

“If we’ll be gone for so long, what if something happens in Chang’an while we’re away?” Hongjun asked.

Qiu Yongsi chuckled as he swept the drawings strewn all over the table into a neat stack. “The chief has surely decided on this course of action for a reason. I’m guessing that’s already taken care of.”

Hongjun, who felt more and more as if he was figuring Li Jinglong out, bobbed his head in agreement.

Rain fell shortly after noon. The oppressive humidity dissipated, replaced by a refreshing coolness.

Hongjun woke from his nap feeling unspeakably content. He and Li Jinglong watched the rain fall from inside their cabin, leaning against each other, skin grazing skin. Somehow, they found themselves shedding their clothes. They made love unrestrainedly, wantonly, Li Jinglong pressing Hongjun against the carved railings of their cabin. They were naked as they faced the open air, with nothing between them and the rain—as if they’d become one with the invigorating natural scene, merging with the heavens and earth.

When they were sated, Hongjun sat before the railing, taking in the mountains lining both sides of the canal. Hair unbound, Li Jinglong sat behind him and dropped gentle kisses on his neck and shoulder.

“Are you thinking of luring Xie Yu back to Chang’an?” Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong hummed in affirmation as he deposited a kiss below Hongjun’s ear. When Li Jinglong tilted his head to kiss his lips, Hongjun asked, “Why?”

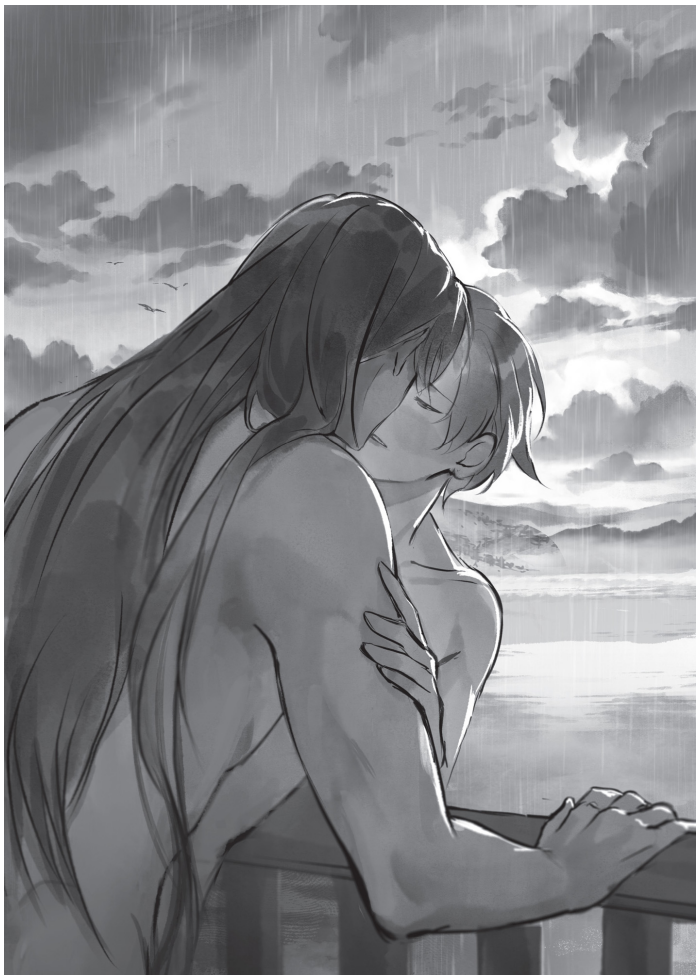
“What do you think?” Li Jinglong said, wrapping his arms around Hongjun’s waist and pulling him into his lap.

Li Jinglong was hard again. Hongjun had done it with him plenty of times since that first day, but it was still painful when Li Jinglong didn’t restrain himself. He tried to wiggle away, but Li Jinglong pulled him back.

Hongjun was exhausted; Li Jinglong had been having his way with him practically since the boat set sail. “Let me take a break…”

“I won’t move once it’s inside,” said Li Jinglong. “I’m serious.”

He coaxed Hongjun to lift his hips and scoot backward. Hongjun sank down, taking the full length of him in with difficulty, then sat straighter. Li Jinglong held him from behind, his chin resting on Hongjun’s shoulder, and they watched the green of the mountains slowly slip by in front of them.



Hongjun relished this feeling—it was as if he and Li Jinglong were the only beings beneath the sky, amid the winds, wholly one with each other.

“So? What do you think?” Li Jinglong prompted him.

Hongjun couldn’t divide his attention, not when Li Jinglong’s cock was so deep in him. Li Jinglong, who could do so with ease, deliberately teased him by talking about department business.

“I think Xie Yu doesn’t dare return,” Li Jinglong said when Hongjun didn’t respond, flexing his knees slightly. “But he must. He still has to pick up the pieces of his failed plot.”

“You promised you wouldn’t move,” Hongjun moaned.

“I’m just adjusting my position,” Li Jinglong said. “This’ll feel better.”

Hongjun reflected that he seemed destined to have sex on boats. “What will happen then?” he squeezed out.

“The divine kun, your dad, and Qing Xiong are all waiting for him to return,” Li Jinglong answered. “We’re not Xie Yu’s only adversaries.”

Hongjun leaned back, resting his head on Li Jinglong’s shoulder. The naked expanse of his back pressed against Li Jinglong’s warm chest, where he could feel the strong, steady beat of his lover’s heart. With every pulse within that muscular body, the heart lamp’s light seemed to suffuse Hongjun in gentle, rolling waves.

Li Jinglong brushed his lips over Hongjun’s and murmured, “I noticed something interesting.”

“What?” Hongjun breathed.

“Guess what I’m thinking about?” Li Jinglong asked, voice laced with amusement.

“You…want to move inside me.”

“Right.” Li Jinglong canted his hips a few times, and Hongjun quickly begged for mercy—he was already feeling a bit winded.

Li Jinglong paused. “Your turn. Think of something, and Gege will guess what’s on your mind.”

Hongjun was perplexed, but Li Jinglong continued after just a moment, “You want to move this to the bed and close the windows because you’re worried someone will see us, right?”

“How did you know that?” That was, indeed, exactly what Hongjun was thinking.

Li Jinglong spread Hongjun’s legs wider apart then thumbed his cock, dragging another moan from him.

In fact, Hongjun had noticed that he and Li Jinglong were growing more and more attuned to each other. Sometimes, he thought he could sense what was on Li Jinglong’s mind. During their discussion about the symbols, for instance, he had grasped Li Jinglong’s train of thought the moment his expression shifted.

Li Jinglong, too, could guess what Hongjun was thinking most of the time. He had already had a good idea simply from Hongjun’s unguarded expressions before, but now he instinctively knew.

Most marvelous of all, whenever they tumbled into bed, whispering sweet nothings in each other’s ears, Li Jinglong could sense it whenever Hongjun felt the slightest hint of discomfort. In turn, whenever Li Jinglong felt pleasure, it heightened Hongjun’s own arousal through the connection forged between them by the heart lamp.

By now, Hongjun knew what Li Jinglong liked and did his best to indulge him when he could. But most times, he still felt too shy to say out loud what Li Jinglong wanted to hear.

Chapter 126:
Cloud Villa by West Lake

"IT'S STRANGE, THOUGH," Hongjun said later as he cautiously took the small bowl of aqua regia Lu Xu passed him and gently blotted a droplet on a gold ring. The surface of the band warped slightly, forming a decorative pattern. "Why do I know what he's thinking sometimes?"

"So you didn't just suddenly get smarter," Lu Xu said flatly, going back to peeling his walnuts.

Hongjun's mouth twitched. "Of course I'm also smart."

"Isn't the reason obvious?" Lu Xu said. "The heart lamp." Realization dawned on Hongjun as Lu Xu continued, "He used the heart lamp's power to seal the demonic energy in your heart, and that forged a connection between you."

Is that why? Hongjun wondered. *Won't we know everything the other person is feeling, then?*

"That's incredible," he said aloud. "How much good fortune must I have gathered in my past life to earn this?"

"You think it's a good thing?" Lu Xu asked.

"Of course."

"Some people might disagree," Lu Xu continued. "If your lover can guess everything on your mind, won't it make things awfully dull?"

"I don't think so," Hongjun said. "Isn't it great if you and the person you like understand each other's hearts perfectly?"

"That's why you're so likable," Lu Xu said with a laugh. Hongjun blinked in confusion.

Spotting Li Jinglong wandering over, Hongjun quickly hid the ring under the desk—though given what they'd just discussed, perhaps there wasn't much point.

But if Li Jinglong noticed, he didn’t draw attention to it. He smiled. “We’re almost there—let’s go out for a look.”

After following the Grand Canal south for several days, the boat had nearly reached its destination. This was to be Hongjun’s first time in Jiangnan, where the houses had white walls and black roofs, and weeping willows were everywhere to be seen. Nanping Mountain in the distance looked like something out of a painting, hazy under the summer sky after the recent bout of rain. A gentle breeze caressed the travelers and sent willow catkins fluttering through the air in the last light of day.

No one but Qiu Yongsi had been to Hang Prefecture before. They all gathered at the railing and gazed toward the shore, exclaiming over the breathtaking scenery.

The resonant toll of a bell echoed from afar, majestic under the setting sun. Standing beneath the dusky sky, Hongjun was struck by a vague sense of familiarity. Li Jinglong’s arms wrapped around his waist from behind, and the two leaned against the railing, gazing into the distance.

“I’ll take you to Gusu some other time,” Qiu Yongsi said, beaming. “If you want to hear bells, Hanshan Temple is the best spot. During his travels to Jiangnan, the poet Zhang Ji once wrote, ‘At moonset, the crows cry, and frost fills autumn skies; where maple trees grow and fishermen’s lamps glow, I recline full of sorrow. Outside the city of Gusu, the lonely Hanshan Temple lies; on a boat moored by the river, I hear the bells toll.’[8] Ah, to drink wine beneath the glow of a fishboat’s lantern—how lovely that would be.”

“I feel like I’ve been here before,” Hongjun said. Although his memories of his childhood were a blur, the air in Hang Prefecture felt familiar.

“Don’t worry if you can’t remember,” Li Jinglong replied. “We’ll stay here two weeks or so. I’ll take you around later.”

The rain over the Guanzhong Plain cleared, and the cicadas gradually began singing again in an endless refrain. As the merchant caravan wound its way into the capital city of Chang’an, the carp yao peeked from under the oilcloth and gaped in shock—wasn’t this the West Market?!

“W-w-wait… We’re in Chang’an! I’m home!” the carp yao exclaimed.

On the way here, he had gotten to know his travel companions—a pheasant yao with a green tail named Lüfei and another with a red crest called Hongshou. Both birds were lethargic from the heat. Compared to the cooler mountains of the Ba-Shu region, Chang’an was sweltering. Noticing how sluggish his companions had become, the carp yao worried they’d caught the bird flu. “Are you okay? Fever hasn’t cooked your brains, has it?”

“*You’re* the one whose brains are cooked,” Hongshou said.

Lüfei asked tiredly, “If we’re here, then why haven’t you gone home?”

As they chatted along the way, the carp yao had boasted to the pheasants that he was a city yao who had lived near the mortal emperor for some time. In fact, he’d explained, he would have left by now, except that he pitied his travel companions and had thus made up his mind to help them.

He could never atone for what he’d done even in his next lifetime—but perhaps he could work toward it, bit by bit.

The cage holding Lüfei and Hongshou was secured with a length of metal wire. As soon as the merchant set the cage on the ground in the bustling West Market, the carp yao quietly untwisted it.

“Go,” he said. “Quick! And don’t reincarnate as yao in your next lives.”

Lüfei and Hongshou were stunned; they hadn’t actually expected the carp yao to help them. They pushed the door open and scurried out cautiously—whereupon they were immediately spotted by their buyer. Another marketgoer yelled, “Your chickens are running away!”

The carp yao frantically shooed the pheasants onward. He hopped onto a nearby stack of jars and toppled them, creating a massive commotion that diverted everyone’s attention.

“Monster! A monster!” someone screamed.

One of the merchant’s assistants gathered his wits and bellowed, “The fish monster’s alive!”

The crowd grabbed sticks and nets in a flurry of limbs, lunging toward the carp yao. Meanwhile, the pheasants flapped their wings, flew up to the roofs, and took off, fleeing for their lives.

The carp yao made a mad dash for the entrance of a narrow lane, the merchant’s assistants pelting after him. Guided by his knowledge of Chang’an, he wove through alleys and scuttled across busy streets. But he had startled the entire marketplace with his ruckus, and found someone around the corner trying to catch him everywhere he turned.

Disoriented, he ran northward without thinking. Before he realized it, he had arrived at the lane housing the Department of Exorcism. He stopped in his tracks.

The horde was hot on his heels. In that moment, he forgot all about his betrayal. “Help! Second-in-Command! Anyone! Help—!”

It was dead silent in the lane. The carp yao turned back and forth, looking for somewhere to hide, but his surroundings were, unfortunately, quite tidy. The entrance to the Department of Exorcism could only be opened with a spiritual technique, and he had no spiritual power. He usually had to call for someone to open it, or he exited and entered with the others.

Assuming the exorcists were giving him the cold shoulder, he nerved himself and called again outside the gates. “Open the door!” he cried. “I’m not joking around here, I’m really going to die—Hongjun! Hongjun, open the door! I know you’re home!”

In the pin-drop silence of the alley, he could hear the crowd’s hurried footsteps behind him. The carp yao went quiet as he gazed up at the seal keeping him out of the Department of Exorcism—at the gates that always used to open for him whenever he came home.

He stood there until the assistant leading the chase finally caught up to him. The last thing he saw was the stick coming down on his head before everything went dark.

It began drizzling again as the wagon jolted forward two hours later. In the tiny cage where Lüfei and Hongshou had once been confined, the carp yao knelt alone, grasping the bars with both hands. He stuck his head out between them, his mouth opening and closing to catch rainwater as it fell from the sky.

“How much are we selling this thing for, boss?” asked an assistant.

“Yaoguai are hard to sell in Chang’an,” the merchant said. “It was a bad deal, buying it at such a high price.”

“Shall we set it free?” another assistant asked.

“Absolutely not,” the merchant snapped. “Do you think money grows on trees? What if this monster hurts someone after we set it free?”

“Ay, boss, I have an idea.”

The merchant and his assistant put their heads together. They would put this fish with arms and legs on display, they decided, and charge the audience a small fee to watch it perform some tricks. Hopefully, they could at least break even.

“Hey.” Another assistant poked the carp yao with a stick. “Can this thing talk?”

The carp yao merely stared blankly back. The rest of the assistants gathered around. One said, “I heard it speak before.”

They took turns trying to goad the creature into talking. When none of them succeeded, they eventually lost interest and drifted away.

The heavens and earth were a vast stretch of green, pure and unsullied, as if washed clean by the rain. The carp yao watched the scenery trundle past as the carriage drove northward, further and further from Chang’an, until the capital was nothing but a smudge on the horizon.

The exorcists trudged behind Qiu Yongsi as they made their way past West Lake. It was so hot their backs were drenched in sweat.

“You call this escaping the heat?!” Li Jinglong snatched Qiu Yongsi’s fan and fanned Hongjun with it.

“It’ll get cooler once the sun sets,” Qiu Yongsi explained.

The fabric of Lu Xu’s thin summer robe clung to his back. “It’s hotter here than in Chang’an!”

“Don’t you come from money, Young Master Qiu?” Mergen said. “Can’t you hire a sedan to take us up to the villa?”

“The Dragon Boat Festival is coming up, so there aren’t any sedans by the lake,” Qiu Yongsi said.

A-Tai lagged behind everyone, cooling the group ahead of him with his cyclone fan. “Please, I’m the one who has it worst! Now hurry up; get a move on!”

Late afternoon was the hottest time of the day. Qiu Yongsi had hired a porter to carry their luggage, but they still felt like they were being steamed alive.

Hongjun glanced around as they walked. He was sure he remembered this place. He recognized, vaguely, the willow trees along the Su causeway, the emerald waters of the lake, the crisscrossing web of light and shadow—everything felt straight out of a dream.

When they reached a humble little house with a tiled roof, Qiu Yongsi announced, “We’re here.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “We’re still about three hundred yards out.”

The exorcists pounced on Qiu Yongsi and began pummeling him with their fists. Qiu Yongsi shrieked, “I’m just trying to liven things up! Why the violence?!”

Completely out of patience, Li Jinglong ordered, “Stop talking and let’s go!”

At last they arrived at the foot of Xizhao Hill on the south bank of West Lake. As the scorching sunlight bore down on them from the west, they spotted a plaque inscribed with four words: *Eternity Among the Clouds.*

“We’re really here now,” Qiu Yongsi said. “This is the entrance to Cloud Villa.”

Qiu Yongsi called out to announce their arrival, and a servant quickly came out to welcome the guest. When he saw that their visitor was none other than the young master himself, he exclaimed in shock, “Young Master, you’re back! Why didn’t you send word that you were returning?”

“These are my colleagues from the Department of Exorcism in Chang’an,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile. “You needn’t worry; we strolled along the lake and enjoyed the scenery on the way.”

As if we wanted to enjoy the scenery with you! everyone thought in exasperation.

The housekeeper of the residence, a middle-aged man in his forties, hurried to prepare two cloth-lined sedans—the only ones in the villa—for their guests. Now that the sun was setting, the air had finally cooled. Everyone declined them out of politeness. At last A-Tai and Turandokht agreed to share one while Ashina Adarvan took the other, and the rest of the group slowly made their way up the hill on foot.

Cloud Villa was a quiet, secluded place. Most of its buildings were hidden in the forests, invisible even from halfway up the hill. Matching sculptures bearing golden platters stood at ten-foot intervals on either side of the path. Past the main gate was a massive stone spirit screen, upon which was carved a relief of a hundred soaring dragons.

Everyone clicked their tongues in amazement. “Wow Yongsi, your family really *is* loaded,” Li Jinglong teased.

Qiu Yongsi quirked his lips. Peering at the screen, Hongjun asked, “Why do you say that?”

“This spirit screen is an imperial gift from the Han dynasty, isn’t it?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Liu Che[9] commissioned it himself,” Qiu Yongsi admitted.

Hongjun stood in front of the spirit screen and examined it from top to bottom. A hundred dragons encircled a night pearl, so lifelike they seemed about to swirl off the stone surface. The pearl wasn’t as big as those at the bottom of the fish pond back in Yaojin Palace, nor as luminous as those serving as hanging lights in the palace’s many cabinets. But Hongjun said none of this aloud and merely nodded. “So pretty.”

Li Jinglong slanted him a look, then grinned and slung an arm around his shoulders as they strode in.

“Grandpa!” Qiu Yongsi called. “I’m back!”

Elegantly built in the ancient Han style, Cloud Villa was a huge complex with seven spacious courtyards. As they entered the main hall, a weathered voice called back, “Yongsi!”

“Grandpa!” Qiu Yongsi rushed toward an elderly man clad in white robes, who cast aside his sage-like demeanor to hurry forward as well. Despite their great disparity in age, the pair were of similar height and stature. As they met, they grasped each other’s hands in a display of joy so exaggerated it rendered everyone else speechless.

“Excellent!” the old man exclaimed, already striding toward the door. “You’re finally back! Time to indulge myself in a trip away from home—”

“Hold it!” Qiu Yongsi yanked him back. “The chief and all my colleagues are here—don’t embarrass me in front of them.”

“I haven’t been to Jade Melody for almost a year, since you left for the capital!” the old man complained. “How can you be so cruel, leaving your grandpa at home all alone?!”

While everyone else nearly face-planted from astonishment, Hongjun piped up: “What’s Jade Melody?”

“Come!” the old man cried in response. “Grandpa here will take you all out to have some fun!”

“Stop that!” Qiu Yongsi yelled.

This, at last, proved effective; the old man turned to the rest of the group. As his eyes roved over them, he exclaimed, as if he’d had an epiphany, “You’re Li Jinglong!”

“I’m not Li Jinglong.” Hongjun’s mouth twitched. “I’m Kong Hongjun.”

Li Jinglong pointed at himself as if to say, *I’m Li Jinglong! Me!*

The elderly man was still circling Hongjun, chuckling. “The moment I saw you, I felt like the two of us were long-lost friends!”

Sputtering, Qiu Yongsi clasped his hands and bowed in apology before introducing everyone to his grandfather, one by one.

“You must properly welcome your friends who have come so far,” his grandfather said after they all stepped forward to greet him. “Grandson, I think you should—”

“Grandpa,” Qiu Yongsi interjected, solemn now. “We brought back Ye Ming’s ashes.”

The elderly man suddenly turned serious. Scanning their faces, he seemed to come to a realization. He smoothed a hand over his beard and laughed aloud, the previous mischief in his expression nowhere to be seen.

“That’s great. Thank you, all of you, for your efforts. Come in, let’s have a proper chat.” He turned back to Hongjun. “Kong Hongjun, was it? I’m Qiu Qiu.”

“Qiu Qiu,” Hongjun parroted, finding the name strange.

“Yes, you say it just like qiu qiu as in *please*,” the elderly man deadpanned.

“No more jokes!” the long-suffering Qiu Yongsi groaned. “Grandpa, can you at least *try* not to embarrass me?!”

Straightening his white martial robes, Qiu Qiu bowed to Li Jinglong. Although Qiu Yongsi’s grandfather was much older than him, Li Jinglong was the Marquis of Yardang, while Qiu Qiu was merely an ordinary citizen. Everyone else greeted him as they would a respected elder.

Qiu Qiu called for a servant to bring them tea. There weren’t many people in Cloud Villa, but the steward and servants were all exceedingly polite. They made no sound as they glided in and poured tea for the guests, going to the extent of holding their breaths and making sure not to block anyone’s line of sight as they moved around the room.

Qiu Qiu’s gaze fell on Mergen. “Oho. You aren’t just skilled in archery, wolf cub; you’re also a fast runner, aren’t you?”

Mergen was shocked speechless. Qiu Qiu winked at Lu Xu, smiling. “Not as fast as you though, I wager.”

Lu Xu burst into laughter.

“When will your antlers grow out?” Qiu Qiu asked.

Lu Xu naturally assumed Qiu Yongsi had told his family about them. Hongjun was less sure. Qiu Qiu’s left pupil held a swirl of dark gold; he wouldn’t be surprised if this old man could perceive more than met the eye. Perhaps Qiu Qiu had already seen all their true forms for himself.

“Soon, I think,” Lu Xu answered.

Qiu Qiu nodded. He looked next at A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, and Turandokht. “A disciple of Zoroastrianism, the young prince of Persia… Our Yongsi’s friends are all quite impressive figures.”

Everyone smiled awkwardly. Qiu Qiu let his eyes wander toward Hongjun again, seemingly in thought, as everyone drank their tea and chatted. Noticing the subtle shift in his expression, Li Jinglong frowned.

After draining the last of his tea, Qiu Yongsi said, “Okay, Grandpa, you can go out and play. I’ll keep our guests company.”

“We’ll see each other later then?” Qiu Qiu asked.

He walked briskly out, but not before casting Hongjun a final glance.

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. “You know him?”

“No,” Hongjun replied in confusion. He couldn’t recall ever visiting Cloud Villa before.

Qiu Yongsi arranged for everyone to be shown to their rooms for a rest before dinner. Just as he had promised, it was cooler atop Xizhao Hill once night fell, the air almost chilly as the mountain breeze wove through the forests.

The members of the Department of Exorcism wandered the villa, each taking a different path. Hongjun strolled around with Li Jinglong after dinner. As darkness fell, the steward found them.

“My lord,” he said, “the Venerable Immortal wishes to meet with you.”

“He’s back already?” Li Jinglong was surprised. He’d expected that Qiu Qiu would want to meet him, but not that he would summon him so soon. He sent Hongjun back to their quarters and followed the steward into the tea room.

When he arrived, Qiu Qiu was drinking tea with his hair loose around his shoulders. Two servant girls knelt on either side, massaging his legs. Qiu Qiu made to rise, but Li Jinglong quickly bowed first.

“There’s no need to abide by the mortal world’s rules, Venerable Immortal; accepting such courtesy from so exalted a person would take years off my lifespan.”

Qiu Qiu chuckled. “I went out just now to meet my longtime lover on a painted boat. But before I could even untie my belt, I remembered something and hurried back.”

Li Jinglong took a seat across from Qiu Qiu, who pointed at a cup on the table and motioned for him to drink. “Among Yongsi’s colleagues, there’s a young man named Kong Hongjun. Did he used to go by the name Kong Chouxing?”

Li Jinglong froze with the cup halfway to his lips, shocked into silence.

Chapter 127:
A Stunning Revelation

THE MOON HUNG suspended above West Lake, spilling its light into Cloud Villa as Hongjun walked through the open-air corridor. A breeze drifted past, bringing an invigorating freshness to the cool summer night.

Glancing around, he spotted Qiu Yongsi sitting cross-legged at a low table in his room, carefully pouring a glowing powder into a bottle fashioned from colored glass.

Instantly curious, Hongjun kicked off his wooden clogs and padded in to kneel in front of the table. Qiu Yongsi looked up at him with a smile. “Help me hold the bottle?”

Hongjun reached for it, only for Qiu Yongsi to raise a warning hand—he wasn’t to touch it. Hongjun summoned his pentacolor sacred light and used it to steady the bottle, then gently scooped up the powder in Qiu Yongsi’s palms to fill it.

“What is this?”

“Ye Ming’s ashes,” Qiu Yongsi murmured. “I’m taking them back to the tower tomorrow.”

Qiu Yongsi seemed much more relaxed after returning home. At this moment, he was shirtless, baring the strong muscles of his torso.

Hongjun had noticed that most of the members of the Department of Exorcism didn’t feel the need to cover up in front of each other. They were all guys, after all. Although some of them were together—he and Li Jinglong, as well as Lu Xu and Mergen—it wasn’t rare for them to strut around wearing nothing but a thin pair of shorts. Especially on the hottest days, Hongjun would practically strip himself naked once he was back home. A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan, both foreign to these lands, were even less concerned with modesty.

Qiu Yongsi was the sole exception. Even during the most scorching days, he was always clad in at least a thin robe and white pants. Li Jinglong

had commented that Qiu Yongsi came from a family of scholars who conducted themselves with propriety, so he was probably accustomed to maintaining a certain appearance before others.

This was Hongjun's first time seeing Qiu Yongsi bare from the waist up. He was exceptionally tall and well-built, even more so than Li Jinglong—he was not at all the frail scholar one might expect. Catching sight of Qiu Yongsi's shoulder from the corner of his eye, Hongjun let out a chirp of surprise.

"Don't tell them." Qiu Yongsi smiled mysteriously. The skin of his shoulders and back was covered with a faint pattern of dragon scales.

When the last of the ashes had trickled into the bottle, Qiu Yongsi sealed it, then took out a stack of paper slips and a small plate. Seeing that he was getting ready to draw talismans, Hongjun fetched the cinnabar powder and mixed it with water to form a paste.

"Did you meet Hongjun's father?" Li Jinglong was suddenly on tenterhooks, as if Qiu Qiu was about to uncover a long-buried secret.

"More than that—we knew each other well." Despite his smile, Qiu Qiu looked tired. "Are his parents still alive?"

"They've passed."

"Ah." Qiu Qiu heaved a long sigh and bowed his head. "So be it. It's been many years since then, to be sure. Does that young man know who his parents were?"

Whenever anyone brought up Hongjun's parents, they seemed to always mention his father, Kong Xuan, but rarely spoke of his mother. All Li Jinglong knew about her was what he'd heard from Noble Consort Yang: She was a woman named Jia Yuze from the Jia clan of Hongnong. The family had dwindled due an epidemic that had befallen the region many years ago.

"His father was the Peacock Wisdom King." Li Jinglong said after some thought, "His mother… She was mortal, I think?"

"How could a mortal possibly bear the demon seed of Mara?" Qiu Qiu asked, his voice heavy with meaning.

A shiver went down Li Jinglong's spine; he had an inkling that he was about to learn something rather shocking.

"A mortal can't?" Li Jinglong asked. "Please, Venerable Immortal, impart your wisdom to me."

"Yao are inherently toxic," Qiu Qiu said. "Any mortal who takes a yao into their bed will meet their death within a year. How many half-human-half-yao have you seen walking around?"

Li Jinglong recalled the peony yao and the gardener they'd met in Luoyang. "But…yao poison can be neutralized with medicine, can't it?"

"Is that so?" Qiu Qiu asked. "How do you do that?"

Li Jinglong explained how Hongjun had suppressed the effects of the peony yao's poison using the ghost king's poison. Qiu Qiu stroked his beard, evidently enlightened. "Ingenious! He takes after his father for certain—he was an excellent doctor."

"Wait…" Halfway through his explanation, Li Jinglong had realized it only added credence to what Qiu Qiu had said. He pondered for a moment before speaking again. "Hongjun was already born when Kong Xuan met the ghost king. He couldn't have used any of the ghost king's poison. So then…"

Kong Xuan had never done anything to neutralize the poison in Jia Yuze's body, but she'd survived and given birth to Hongjun anyway. Perhaps the pregnancy and delivery had been particularly difficult—this he didn't know—but regardless, could Jia Yuze really be a mortal, as everyone assumed?

"Did you ever meet Yaoji?"[10] Qiu Qiu continued. "She possessed exceptional beauty, truly unparalleled. What a pity that child doesn't resemble her."

This befuddled Li Jinglong further. "Wait…this Yaoji is…Hongjun's mother? But his mother's name wasn't Yaoji—her name was Jia Yuze!"

"Jia Yuze." Qiu Qiu nodded. "Where has she reincarnated now, I wonder?"

Shocked, Li Jinglong looked up at Qiu Qiu. "You knew her too?"

“I did,” Qiu Qiu said. “I was by her side the day she gave birth to Yongsi, a hundred thirty-five years ago.”

The words exploded like thunder in Li Jinglong’s ears. They were so far beyond his ken that his first thought was that this hoary old man was making a fool of him. “May…may I ask how old you are?” he asked, a deep frown on his face.

“In human years, I’m over a hundred eighty years old,” Qiu Qiu answered. “When Ye Ming was still alive, time flowed differently inside and outside the tower—one day in the tower was equivalent to one year in the mortal world. But now, I’m old! Old!”

Qiu Yongsi lay out the sheets of talisman paper, one by one. Hongjun watched, resting his chin on the desk. Qiu Yongsi dipped a brush in cinnabar and squinted at the book of twisting ancient script he was holding with his right hand.

When Hongjun laughed, Qiu Yongsi asked drily, “What’s so funny?”

“You still have to check the book? I see you haven’t done your homework properly.”

“I can’t be bothered to memorize the characters,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “I never liked drawing them, even when I was little.”

“Who taught you?”

“My grandpa.”

Something stirred in the back of Hongjun’s mind. Since arriving at Cloud Villa, he hadn’t seen any signs of Qiu Yongsi’s parents. Hongjun realized Qiu Yongsi had never mentioned them before. He was curious—but remembering he would be upset if someone asked him about *his* parents out of the blue, he held his tongue.

“They’re dead,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile, as if he’d read Hongjun’s mind.

Hongjun nodded. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Qiu Yongsi dragged his brush across the paper, then lifted it. He drew another stroke, followed by a circle, then a curving line. “You want to ask

me how they died, don’t you?”

“You don’t have to talk about it.”

“I never even met them. My grandpa never told me anything about them, except that their enemies caused their deaths.”

“Who?” Hongjun couldn’t resist asking.

Qiu Yongsi shook his head. “Those enemies are all dead now, too—they were murdered.”

Then why do you have dragon scales on your body? Hongjun’s brows crimped.

“Ah, that’s right.” Qiu Yongsi had seen through him again. With a grin, he said, “My dad was a dragon.”

Hongjun started in surprise.

Qiu Yongsi finished the first talisman and set it aside before looking up at Hongjun. He turned sideways. “Wanna touch?”

Intrigued, Hongjun asked, “Can I?”

“Just make sure the chief doesn’t see,” Qiu Yongsi joked. “Or he’ll have my head.”

“Forget it, then.” Hongjun pressed a hand to his brow. Before Qiu Yongsi mentioned it, he hadn’t thought of it that way. The two of them were alone in a private room after dark. If Li Jinglong stumbled in and found him feeling up Qiu Yongsi’s naked shoulders, how could they explain themselves?

“Look,” Qiu Yongsi said. “I have some over here too.”

He turned a little more, baring his back. The dragon scales were faint on his skin, but they shimmered lightly in the moonlight: a sheen of silver snaking down his spine toward the small of his back, where it disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers.

“Your dad was a dragon!” Hongjun marveled.

Anyone else would have been stunned, but Hongjun’s dad was a peacock, and his adoptive father was a phoenix. Upon seeing these traces of Qiu Yongsi’s dragon blood, his most immediate reaction was, *Hey, you’re half yao too!*

Counting the gray wolf and white deer, the Department of Exorcism was almost overrun with yao. If A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan turned out to be yao too, Li Jinglong would be the only one who was human through and through. At that point, it would truly seem that fate had played a trick on them.

“Sorry, I was joking.” Qiu Yongsi laughed. “My dad’s not a dragon. Would he have been killed if he was?”

Hongjun reflected that he had a point.

“My mother had a difficult labor,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “My grandpa took her into the Dragon-Quelling Tower and begged one of the dragons to aid my delivery. The dragon bestowed some of its energy on us. That’s why I’ve had these marks ever since I was born.”

“Oh.” Hongjun nodded, then added, “Your dragon scales look so cool though!”

Qiu Yongsi passed the four talismans he’d drawn to Hongjun, who spread them out on the desk to dry. “That’s why I like chatting with you, Hongjun. You’ve seen so much of the world. You’re not astonished by trivial things like this.”

Hongjun didn’t think he’d seen that much, but it was true he was rarely surprised, and he never paid much attention to anyone’s origins or family background. Looking down at the talismans, he asked, “What are these for?”

“An array,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “When I enter the tower, I’ll set these down along with the bottle.”

“What do they do?”

“They commence the cycle between yin and yang, between being and nonbeing, and open the door to myriad wonders,” Qiu Yongsi said absently, resuming his drawing. “This array makes time pass very, very slowly inside the tower. How slowly, you ask? In the tower, it feels like no time has gone by at all, while so much time has passed in the mortal world that oceans have become mulberry fields…”

“A hundred and thirty-five years?” Li Jinglong exclaimed.

“A hundred and thirty-five years,” Qiu Qiu confirmed.

Li Jinglong felt like he was in a dream. He stared at Qiu Qiu, wondering if he should have a doctor look over this elderly immortal. “You’re telling me Qiu Yongsi’s mother and Hongjun’s mother are the same person—that they’re brothers?! Even though Qiu Yongsi is a hundred thirty-five years old, while Hongjun’s only seventeen?!”

“Exactly,” Qiu Qiu said. “Well, to be precise, their mothers are different incarnations of the same woman—Yaoji.”

“And who is this Yaoji?” Li Jinglong asked in disbelief.

As Qiu Qiu spoke her name, his wizened face brightened, his wrinkles creasing as he smiled with the simplicity of a child. “A very, very beautiful young lady.”

“Wait…” Li Jinglong said. “I still can’t believe this. Old m—sir, can you swear you aren’t lying to me?”

“Excuse me!” Qiu Qiu’s temper flared. “Why would I bother lying to a youngster like you? For a laugh?”

Frustrated, Li Jinglong silently fumed, *You’ve been making a fool out of me from the beginning, haven’t you?*

They held each other’s gazes, neither looking away. Finally, Qiu Qiu relented. He began speaking wistfully, as if immersed in a timeworn memory.

“The day Yongsi was born, a hundred thirty-five years ago, was also the day his father was hanged. Back then, his mother went by the name Li Shunying. Yongsi was born in the Dragon-Quelling Tower. ‘How wide the Han River stretches, that no one can swim its breadth; how eternal its waters flow, that no raft can cross its span.’[11] Inspired by this poem, Shunying named him Yongsi. She had him take my surname. After leaving the Dragon-Quelling Tower, she was lost and never found again. But she and I made a promise: No matter how much time passed or where her wanderings took her, she had to visit West Lake once to see me and the child she shared with A-Chuang.”

There was a moment of silence. “A…A-Chuang?” Li Jinglong stuttered. “*He’s* Yongsi’s father? Surely you don’t mean *that* A-Chuang?”

“I do.” Qiu Qiu poured tea into two cups and whisked one lightly before passing it to Li Jinglong, who took it with a shaking hand. Over a hundred years ago, this man nicknamed A-Chuang was known to all by another name: Yang Guang, Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty.

“Shunying died long ago—even I don’t know precisely when.” Qiu Qiu was still speaking as if in a trance. “The next time she appeared before me, she’d reincarnated. She’d forgotten everything but her promise—even her child in the Dragon-Quelling Tower. She had a new home, a new lover.”

Qiu Qiu stopped for a moment, seemingly overwhelmed with sadness. He continued as if Li Jinglong wasn't there. "She had a son, who'd eventually come to befriend Yongsi. I think now that their paths were fated to cross—and all because of Xie Yu. If he hadn't stolen Ye Ming's corpse and escaped the Dragon-Quelling Tower, those two might never have met."

"How old's your grandpa?" Hongjun asked.

"How old does he look?" Qiu Yongsi said, turning the question back on him.

Hongjun guessed eighty, ninety, then a hundred years old, but Qiu Yongsi smiled and shook his head each time. At last, he said, "I don't know either. He's in the tower sometimes, outside of it at other times, so his age is difficult to calculate. I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to. Reckoning by mortal years, at least a century has passed since his birth."

"Xie Yu escaped two centuries ago," Hongjun said, curiosity piqued again. "After Ye Ming's ashes were stolen, didn't the flow of time inside the tower return to normal?"

"Ye Ming's soul is still there, so no," Qiu Yongsi answered. "But its power is weakening. After Xie Yu killed him two hundred years ago, his soul was enough to keep the time barrier intact. At first, one year in the mortal world was equivalent to one day in the tower, then it became two days, three days… As the years pass, time in the tower goes by quicker and quicker."

"What will happen when his soul is gone?" Hongjun asked.

"Once Ye Ming's soul dissipates completely, the flow of time inside the Dragon-Quelling Tower will be the same as it is outside. The time barrier will collapse, and it can never be restored."

"Will the dragons inside escape?"

"Not the dragons. They chose to be confined of their own volition. But the jiao locked in the abyss will break out and cause a calamity even worse than the reincarnation of Mara here in the mortal world."

Hongjun frowned. "How many of them are there?"

“Several thousand?” Qiu Yongsi drew his last talisman—the ninth. After setting it next to the others on the table, he smiled at Hongjun. “More than ten thousand? I haven’t counted.”

That would be a disaster, Hongjun thought. Xie Yu had practically overturned Chang’an by himself, and he was only one jiao; several thousand would be enough to wreck even the Taihang Mountains.

“Xie Yu is a special case,” Qiu Yongsi said, guessing his thoughts once again. “When he escaped, he brought Ye Ming’s ashes with him, which gave him the ability to tamper with cause and effect, and the flow of time. Without the hourglass, he’s just an ordinary jiao.”

Chapter 128:
The Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal

HONGJUN NODDED, and both of them fell silent. As they waited for the talismans to dry, Qiu Yongsi gave Hongjun a look he couldn't decipher. "Say, do you think they'll dry by tomorrow morning?"

"They'll be dry in no time. You won't need to wait until tomorrow."

"If it were up to me, they'd take a hundred years to dry. But I don't get to decide, unfortunately."

Hongjun had no idea what he meant by that. They waited a while longer, until Hongjun began to yawn. Shaking himself awake, he was about to tell Qiu Yongsi he was heading back to his room to get some sleep when Qiu Yongsi abruptly said, "Don't say anything, Hongjun; let's just stay like this."

A breeze drifted into the room, rustling the talismans on the desk. Qiu Yongsi studied Hongjun's confused expression with a smile. "You're sleepy, aren't you?"

Hongjun hummed. He was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Okay," Qiu Yongsi said. "Let's go."

He swept the talismans into a pile and rose from his seat. A befuddled Hongjun followed suit, holding the colored glass bottle.

Qiu Yongsi motioned for him to wait, then disappeared into the inner chamber to pack his things. When he reemerged, he wore a gleaming suit of brocade armor filigreed with the sun, moon, and stars. His belt and boots were both embroidered with clouds, and the ensemble was topped off by a helmet shaped like a dragon. The shafts of his boots, as well as his shoulder guards and helmet, all sported wings that resembled billowing clouds.

"You're going into the tower now?" Hongjun asked. "Why not wait till tomorrow?"

Qiu Yongsi looked mournful. "What can be done today, I shouldn't leave for tomorrow."

Hongjun had the niggling feeling that something wasn't right, but he couldn't put his finger on what. He studied Qiu Yongsi, sensing that he had changed—he now commanded himself like an emperor, his bearing even more regal than that of Li Longji himself.

Clothes truly did make the man, Hongjun thought; Qiu Yongsi now appeared as mighty and solemn as the Zoroastrian war god Ashina Adarvan had summoned, and as heroically dashing as the leader of the heavenly generals described in novellas.

Qiu Yongsi was obviously not used to wearing the armor. "I look like I'm about to sing opera on stage, don't I? This helmet is so uncomfortable."

"You look amazing!" Hongjun's praise was completely sincere. "You should make a drawing of yourself."

"Hm? Why? To scare evil creatures away from my door?" Qiu Yongsi joked. "Let's go."

He slung an arm around Hongjun's shoulders and led him around the back of the villa, where a narrow path led to a round platform at the foot of a nine-storied tower.

"Do you remember the day we played music and sang at the department headquarters?" Qiu Yongsi asked as they walked, a smile on his face.

"Of course." Hongjun remembered it vividly. They'd been in the middle of playing and singing when the door crashed in, revealing Li Jinglong and Feng Changqing's faces contorted in shock. They all joked about it often, in mutual agreement that it was probably the happiest moment of their lives.

"And our visit to the Spring Oriole, too," Qiu Yongsi continued. "Which only happened thanks to the chief…"

In the tea room, Li Jinglong was racking his brain for anything that would disprove Qiu Qiu's claims. "Aren't Li Bai and Yongsi cousins? And Li Bai's obviously older, isn't he?"

"They're related through Qiu Yongsi's mother," Qiu Qiu explained. "Cousins so distant no one knows who's really older, so they refer to each

other based on perceived rank at the time."

"Why…why are you telling me all this?" Li Jinglong asked.

"I want to know if this reincarnation of Yaoji left any last words before her death," Qiu Qiu replied. "My time is almost up. I won't live much longer, even if I enter the tower again. My dearest wish is to meet her once more before my death—just once, and I'll be happy."

"I—I have no idea…" Li Jinglong said haltingly. "Hongjun never talks about his mother… I…"

He rose in a daze, brows locked in a deep furrow. He'd wanted to ask the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal if he knew where the five other artifacts of Acalanatha were hidden, but now that thought had completely flown from his mind.

Amused, Qiu Qiu said, "This has nothing to do with you, does it? Why do you look so shocked?"

In a way, Li Jinglong supposed he was right. Although Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi shared a connection through their mothers, they weren't brothers in any true sense of the word. These two reincarnations of Yaoji had fallen in love with different men in different lives. Could the children she'd had with them really be considered siblings? Of course not—if so, everyone would have more siblings and relatives than they could count.

Yet something still seemed strange. Qiu Qiu had told a harmless anecdote about his grandson's birth, but Li Jinglong couldn't bring himself to think of it that way.

"Yongsi… So that was how his life began," he said at last. "He hasn't had it easy, either."

"He grew up in the tower," Qiu Qiu said. "I never told him about his relationship with the imperial Yang family, so please keep that to yourself. He's a good kid—obedient and mature since he was little. He's always taken everything I told him to heart, accepted it all without protest. Old as I am, I'm sure to meet my death soon. I only worry he'll be lonely once I die—he's never had many friends."

Qiu Yongsi was skilled at everything, from appraising tea to painting, calligraphy, and weiqi. Li Jinglong had always assumed he came from a

wealthy family of exorcists and had never been short of friends back in his hometown. Yet it appeared this couldn't be further from the truth.

"He wrote to me often from Chang'an," Qiu Qiu continued. "He adores you all. But despite that smile he always wears, he isn't forthright with his feelings, especially to his brothers—say too much, and he'll blush. Please keep him company over these next few days. After all, he's going into the tower soon."

"What do you mean?"

"While centuries flow by and everything changes here in the mortal world," Qiu Qiu said solemnly, "the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal's life always revolves around one constant—this tower."

"The hot springs we went to that day were so nice," Qiu Yongsi said.

"It's too hot for that in the summer," Hongjun said. "Jinglong agreed to take us there again this winter."

Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi stood on the platform and gazed at the Dragon-Quelling Tower from afar. To Hongjun's surprise, the tower levitated in midair, its underbelly emitting a faint varicolored glow. It seemed to have no door.

Finding the helmet cumbersome, Qiu Yongsi removed it and hugged it to his chest. He'd tied his long hair up in a high ponytail, transforming his usual scholarly appearance into one of a great general ready to slaughter his enemies on the battlefield. He took the glass bottle from Hongjun and said with a smile, "When I first met you, I had a strange premonition."

"I felt like I'd met you before, too, but I couldn't explain why," Hongjun replied, studying Qiu Yongsi. He thought back to how he'd felt when he first worked with Qiu Yongsi to catch the fox yao—he'd found Qiu Yongsi instantly familiar, as dependable as an older brother.

"I had a feeling, back then, that you'd be the one to walk this final stretch with me," Qiu Yongsi said. "It seems I was right."

"Wait." A wave of uneasiness washed over Hongjun. "What do you mean? Yongsi-ge, what are you going to do?"

Qiu Yongsi gazed at the Dragon-Quelling Tower, then at Hongjun. “I’ll need to pour all my spiritual energy into repairing the time barrier in the tower—a process that will take me two hundred days.”

As Hongjun stared in shock, Qiu Yongsi continued, “The deterioration started when Xie Yu escaped the tower. Before I can repair it, I have to reverse the damage Xie Yu did, then fix the array, which is to say —”

“You have to stay in there for two *centuries*?” Hongjun exclaimed in disbelief.

Qiu Yongsi nodded.

“No—wait,” Hongjun blurted out in a panic. “Why didn’t you discuss this with everyone else?”

“I thought about saying goodbye to everyone tomorrow morning. We’ve been together for so long; everyone in the Department of Exorcism is like family to me. But saying goodbye like that will only bring us all unnecessary sorrow. I might as well…” He trailed off, offering Hongjun a sad smile.

“But we still haven’t caught Xie Yu!” Hongjun protested. “And we haven’t dealt with Mara! How can you just go in there like this? Can’t you wait a while longer?”

“Time will flow faster and faster in the tower if I do,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “The longer I put it off, the more chances something will go wrong. The chief will eliminate Xie Yu on my behalf, so my mission to capture him and bring him to justice doesn’t matter anymore.”

Hongjun had never imagined tonight would end with him saying goodbye to Qiu Yongsi forever. “I…” he began, mind spinning. “I’m fetching the chief. You can’t do this! Yongsi!”

Qiu Yongsi merely watched Hongjun in silence before extending an arm. Hongjun dazedly leaned forward, and Qiu Yongsi pulled him into a tight hug. “Take care of yourself,” he murmured. “Tell everyone not to miss me too much when I’m gone. You can let A-Tai know he won’t need to pay me back for our last visit to Pingkang Ward—but not in front of Turandokht.”

Hongjun clung to Qiu Yongsi's waist, pressing his cheek to the chest plate of that elaborate armor. Emotions roiled in him, but he found himself unable to utter even a single word in response. He still hadn't come to terms with Qiu Yongsi's departure; the whole thing felt like a bad dream.

Qiu Yongsi spread his fingers, and his brush twirled through the air. A thousand points of starlight spilled from its soft bristles to blanket the platform, instantly transforming it into a massive, slowly revolving transportation array. He placed his other hand on Hongjun's shoulder and shoved him away, off the platform.

Stumbling back, Hongjun caught sight of a cloud of black mist spreading from the trees behind Qiu Yongsi. *What is that?*

"I'm off, then," Qiu Yongsi said. "Until we meet again, Hongjun."

"Wait—"

The mist thickened as it rolled toward them. Hongjun at last registered what was going on—this mist shouldn't be here! He screamed on instinct, "Li Jinglong—!"

Qiu Yongsi called "Don't shout!" a split second before the cloud of black mist exploded. The roiling silhouette of a jiao broke from its center, swooping at them with a sinister hiss.

Finally sensing something amiss, Qiu Yongsi jerked his head around. Under the moonlight, the obsidian mist poured out of the forest and converged into an arrow that streaked toward Qiu Yongsi. It struck the glass bottle with a crisp *clink*, knocking it from his hand.

The transportation array whirled at an ever-increasing speed. Out of the black mist, the silhouettes of several yao—the celestial nine-tailed fox, Fei'ao, the dark lady, and others Hongjun couldn't make out—lunged for the bottle.

Hongjun was faster. He shot into the air and dove into the transportation array. Planting one foot on Qiu Yongsi's shoulder, he somersaulted through the air and hooked the bottle back toward him with a well-aimed kick.

Qiu Yongsi yanked the brush from its fastening at his waist and flourished it. Making a grab for Hongjun, he roared, "Get out of here!"

The tips of Hongjun's fingers brushed the bottle. He crooked them, nudging it toward himself just enough to grasp it tightly.

At the edges of the round platform, blinding azure flames exploded, engulfing both Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi and licking up toward the sky.

Xie Yu slammed headfirst into the ring of flames and ricocheted off, repelled by the barrier around the array. He shook himself with an enraged snarl.

Li Jinglong was walking through the corridor back to his room when his heart lurched violently in his chest. It was an unprecedented sensation—the effect of the powerful fluctuation of Hongjun's emotions.

"Hongjun?" he called, heart pounding. An earthshaking rumble sounded in the distance.

The other members of the Department of Exorcism, who had fallen asleep not long ago, hurried from their rooms into the backyard corridor. A pillar of blue light was shooting into the sky.

Without thinking, Li Jinglong asked, "Where's Hongjun?"

He looked at the faces around him—Hongjun's conspicuously absent—and had an ominous premonition.

Eyes trained on the sky, everyone watched as the black jiao crashed into the barrier of blue light, then shook itself off and soared toward the top of the Dragon-Quelling Tower.

Harried footsteps sounded behind them as Qiu Qiu arrived. "Xie Yu?!" he roared. "It's that damned beast!"

Li Jinglong drew the Sword of Wisdom and dashed toward the rear mountains.

As the sun rose, the traveling merchants washed themselves in a creek near the He-Luo region. One assistant submerged a cage in the water, but the creature within remained still, its eyes glassy. It didn't move its clammy body an inch even when the cage was lifted again.

"Can this thing do any tricks?"

“Are you serious? It’s just a carp. Do you want it to breathe fire or something?”

“It should be able to jump through hoops, at least! Boss spent so much silver on it.”

“Leave it alone,” the merchant said. “We’ll take it into Fanyang. If we still can’t sell it by the end of the day, we’ll release it.”

At this, the carp yao’s gills fluttered, and he rolled his eyes toward them. The instant the merchant turned, his eyes glazed over again.

“Say, what do you think this carp thinks about all day?”

“What else would a fish think about? Worms, right?” An assistant held up a wriggling worm and tried to feed it to the carp, who, as if on hunger strike, refused to eat, its mouth fluttering. The assistant nudged the worm into its mouth with a chopstick, then stowed the cage out of sight as they resumed their journey.

Eventually the worm wiggled out of the carp yao’s maw. Famished, he grabbed it and stuffed it back into his mouth, swallowing it whole.

The caravan entered Fanyang bright and early. Compared to when the merchant had visited last year, the region overseen by military governor An Lushan was fraught with tension. The guards by the gates inspected them repeatedly before letting them into the city, which was now overrun with iron foundries.

Skies grayed with ash, Fanyang looked like an ancient city engulfed in flames. Sparks flew and thick smoke billowed from the ironmongers’ furnaces, looming above the city in a dark cloud. There were many more iron-forged goods in the market than before, yet the citizens looked morose, their faces blackened with soot as they hurried down streets diligently patrolled by guards.

After half a day at the market, the merchants had neither bought nor sold anything. They’d planned on ending their expedition here, but all the goods in the market were strictly regulated. But they’d already rented a stall, so the merchants resorted to putting the yaoguai up for sale once again.

“Take a look—” the merchant called unenthusiastically. “We have a monster for sale here!”

Even in bustling Luoyang, no one had wanted to buy the unattractive carp yao; after standing around the sparsely attended market until noon, the merchant was forced to accept his misfortune. When he went to open the cage, he felt a surge of resentment—not only had he wasted money on this fish, but thanks to its meddling, the pheasants he’d gotten his hands on had also escaped.

Cursing up a storm, he kicked the cage until he heard the ringing of hooves on stone. A woman’s voice asked, “Huh? A yaoguai?”

Turning back, he was greeted with the sight of a female general, clad in armor emblazoned with the insignia of An Lushan’s army. No guards trailed her. He quickly bowed, clasping his hands before him, and began explaining the carp yao’s origins.

The general looked down at the merchant from atop her horse. “How much are you asking for the fish?”

The merchant put up four fingers with an obsequious smile. “I bought this creature in Chencang for a great sum.”

Shooting the carp yao a glance, the general whistled, and a soldier patrolling the streets came over. “Pay him four hundred taels,” she said.

The merchant nearly choked—but as seasoned as he was, he quickly schooled his expression. In the cage, the carp yao turned his head and studied the general with one round eye. She didn’t even wait for the merchant to be paid before extending her hand, motioning for him to hand over the cage. The merchant rushed to comply.

She fastened the carp yao’s cage to her saddle and pressed her knees to her horse’s side to be on her way.

The carp yao, flopping around in his cage with every trot, was befuddled. *She’s not going to eat me, is she? What’s going to happen to me?*

No one with an ounce of brains in their head would spend four hundred taels on a carp just to steam or braise it for lunch, would they? Granted this woman didn’t kill him, he might still have a chance of escape if she let him out of the cage.

He somewhat remembered the way here, and even if he didn’t, he could always swim up the Yellow River, then turn into the Jing River to enter Chang’an. But was there any point in going back? The Department of Exorcism no longer wanted him. Hongjun must have heard him wailing outside, yet he’d refused to open the door for him.

He no longer had a home to go back to. At this thought, the carp yao was overwhelmed with despair.

The carp yao’s cage was removed from the horse and tossed onto the floor of the new room. From the little he saw through the bars, he seemed to be in the general’s residence.

His new owner turned around and removed her armor, then glanced at him in the mirror. “Can you speak?”

There was no other human in the room; the question was clearly meant for the carp yao, who remained silent, gripping the bars of his cage.

“You look so stupid.” The general laughed. “You haven’t acquired a human form yet, have you?”

She shrugged off her inner robes, revealing ivory skin and a gently curving waist. “You weren’t putting your all into cultivating, I take it. How did you end up captured by a human?”

The carp yao stared as the general stripped herself naked. When she reached her ankles, she began to peel off her skin, pulling it up like a dress to reveal bloody flesh beneath.

Terror-stricken, the carp yao screeched, “Monster! Ahhhhhh!”

Chapter 129:
Entering the Tower

THE GENERAL TILTED her head back, giggling. A dense web of blood vessels crisscrossed her horrifying face, and her facial muscles contorted at a strange angle. “You’re afraid of yaoguai even though you’re one yourself?”

Realizing she had a point, the carp yao shut his mouth. The woman facing him was a painted-skin yao. They had only raw flesh; they needed to peel the skin off humans to aid their cultivation. Now that he’d gotten over his initial shock, his fear had dissipated. The sight of a human without skin was about as strange to him as the sight of a peeled shrimp was to a human—which was to say, not at all.

“My name is Liang Danhuo.” The yao set the lovely human skin she’d stripped off aside. “You can call me Danhuo. And you? What’s your name?”

The carp yao gazed back silently.

“Do I look pretty?” Danhuo made herself comfortable lounging on her side on the bed. She pulled a sheet up to cover her chest, leaving the rest of her body—dripping with blood—on full display. Her eyeballs spun in their bare sockets.

While she waited for the carp yao to respond, she opened a box and began eating whatever was inside. “Want some?” she asked, leaning over to open the cage.

The carp yao looked around, plainly thinking of making a break for it. “Don’t run,” she said. “Where else in this world can you live so well?”

She handed him one of her snacks through the bars. He looked down and jumped in fright—it was a severed pinky finger. “I… I’m not eating that!” he stammered, trembling in shock. “Also, who the hell are you? Where am I?”

“This is a home to all of us yao,” Danhuo said. “I’ll introduce you to our leader later. Now that you’re here, you should stay. Poor thing, you must’ve been through a lot.”

The carp yao’s mouth opened and closed. He suddenly wanted to cry. So what if he was standing across from a man-eating yao? This painted-skin yao dripping blood no longer seemed like a monster, but a messenger sent from heaven to save him.

The shrill squealing of a pig sounded outside. “Time for dinner,” Danhuo said. “Let’s get going, shall we?”

She opened her wardrobe to reveal a neatly arranged row of human skins, from which she chose one belonging to an older woman.

“Follow me. The manor’s huge. Don’t get lost, or I won’t be able to find you.” She pushed the door open, then turned back. “Aren’t you hungry?”

The carp yao was afraid—but he had nowhere else to go. He was starving, and his injuries had yet to heal. At last, he steeled himself to hop out of his cage and follow Danhuo.

“I don’t eat humans,” the carp yao said, his first coherent words since his arrival. “I’m a good yao.”

“I doubt you could even if you wanted to,” Danhuo replied curtly.

Night had come by the time they left the room. Rain fell in a fine drizzle. The carp yao scurried through the corridor after Danhuo, who was now clad in the skin of an elegant woman in her fifties, her scarlet robes rolled up at the sleeves. To Zhao Zilong’s surprise, the guards and servants of the residence seemed to fear her and averted their gazes whenever she passed by.

What plants he could see from the corridor looked strange. Deformed grapevines twisted menacingly, bearing fruit that varied dramatically in size, while the pagoda trees had leaves like sharp teeth, resembling monsters waiting to prey on humans in the dark. Fiendish reliefs lined the walkway, and a folding screen in the main hall depicted an unidentifiable yaoguai feasting on humans, blood pouring from its mouth. The lamps, although they shone brightly, cast an uncanny, otherworldly glow upon the hall.

In the deepest recesses of the hall, countless yaoguai growled. All turned to look at Danhuo as she led the carp yao inside. A colossal beast sat at the head of the hall, oozing black mist.

The carp yao's heart stuttered. *An Lushan!*

The first time he had seen An Lushan was when the enormous governor had first arrived in Chang'an. While Hongjun and the others flocked out to witness the grand procession, the carp yao had snuck away to report to Yang Guozhong. Before he could return, An Lushan's entourage happened to pass by. The carp yao, hiding behind Yang Guozhong, had managed to take a peek from afar.

An Lushan was as massive as before, but his flesh was now the burnt-black of charcoal and gave off a rotten odor. The gleam of his ever-present golden bands and tortoiseshell accessories seemed incongruous with his ruined body, like treasures thrown into a massive pool of feces, surfacing and sinking in the wobbling mountain of An Lushan's flesh.

Having lost the protection of the sacred flame, An Lushan—a mere mortal—could no longer combat the corroding effects of the demonic energy within him. The rot was slowly consuming his body.

White light flashed before Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi, expanding into a ring that glowed blindingly bright in the darkness, thrumming insistently as it swallowed them both.

Hongjun stumbled and fell, his cheek scraping against solid ground as he skidded down a steep slope. He scrambled for a handhold, a fearful scream slipping from him. Closing his fingers around something warm and solid, he looked up to find an unconscious Qiu Yongsi.

"Yongsi!" he shouted, panic-stricken. It seemed Qiu Yongsi had passed out the moment the array dropped them here.

They were sliding downward at breakneck speed. Hongjun drew one of his throwing knives and twisted, attempting to pin it to the freezing ground, but the blade merely clacked against the surface and slipped off.

They had arrived in a deserted landscape. The only thing under the wide-open skies was the icy slope beneath them. As they accelerated,

Hongjun hacked at the surface repeatedly in an attempt to slow their descent. At last an idea came to him. He merged the knives into his saber, flipped over, and slammed it into the ground.

There was a crisp crack as the saber sank through the steep surface as though it were tofu, creating a narrow gash an inch wide. Hongjun wrenched the saber deeper inside. With another *clink*, the saber jumped in his grip, and the back of its blade caught in the crack; the resulting shock nearly flung Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi into the air.

Fortunately, Hongjun was strong. He held onto the saber despite being weighed down by over three hundred pounds—the weight of two adult men—while also battling gravity. As pain shot through his shoulders and back, Hongjun summoned his pentacolor sacred light and fortified his body with it. Only then did they finally come to a stop.

Taking the chance to look around, he realized why it was so cold. They had fallen onto an enormous expanse of ice atop a towering mountain, and had been sliding down the smooth slope of a massive glacier.

Fifty feet below them lay the edge of the ice, ending in a sharp overhang no more than a few feet wide. Beneath *that* was an abyss so deep Hongjun couldn't see the bottom. Holding the unconscious Qiu Yongsi with one hand and gripping his saber tightly with his other, he dangled near the brink, unable to move an inch.

"Yongsi!" he shouted.

There was no reaction.

Where are we? Hongjun sifted through his muddled memories. Xie Yu had appeared out of nowhere right when Qiu Yongsi was about to enter the Dragon-Quelling Tower and attacked them, destabilizing the transportation array. The last thing he'd heard was an explosive *boom* before opening his eyes in this strange place.

The sky was vast and empty—there was no sun, moon, nor any stars—save for a strange, blinking light. Not even a breeze blew in this eerily quiet world. Hongjun was quite sure that he was in the Dragon-Quelling Tower. But what he saw here—an ancient snowy peak under an oddly blank sky—was nothing like what he'd pictured. *Who built this tower?* he wondered. *I didn't expect it to be so big inside!*

No help would be coming here. What should he do?

Opposite the chunk of glacier they were dangling from was a cliff with a narrow ledge only a few fingers wide. It was about a hundred feet away, slightly below them, but Hongjun figured he could make the jump… *Okay, let's do this!*

Taking a deep breath, Hongjun kicked off the clogs he'd been wearing in Cloud Villa. They plummeted into the abyss, disappearing without a sound.

Good thing I didn't fall down there or I'd be smashed to pieces.… It'd always upset Hongjun that he couldn't fly, unlike both Chong Ming and Qing Xiong. Perhaps they'd declined to teach him because they didn't want him leaving Yaojin Palace—but this had given him a world of trouble.

Eyes on the ledge, he pushed off the ice with bare feet, using the momentum to swing himself and Qiu Yongsi through the air.

The glass bottle containing Ye Ming's ashes, now tucked into Qiu Yongsi's lapels, wobbled dangerously as his body swung to and fro, threatening to tumble into the abyss.

Dawn was breaking when Li Jinglong arrived in front of the tower at a run. Qiu Qiu had beaten him there, gazing up at the lofty structure enshrouded in the faint glow of morning. The demonic energy lingering in Xie Yu's wake had already dissipated.

"Did you see him?" Li Jinglong looked back. "Did anyone else?"

"I'm sure he flew into the tower," Qiu Qiu said.

The last thing Li Jinglong recalled seeing was Xie Yu flying toward the top of the tower before he disappeared.

"Xie Yu followed Yongsi into the tower," A-Tai agreed. "He must have."

Everyone was at a loss for what to do. Brow furrowed, Mergen asked, "How could the master of the house not know that Xie Yu was in the villa?"

“How… How could I possibly expect he’d show up here?” Qiu Qiu protested. “It makes no sense for him to come back! What criminal would return to prison after breaking out?!”

“He knew Qiu Yongsi would bring Ye Ming’s ashes back to the Dragon-Quelling Tower,” Li Jinglong said. “We were careless this time.”

Truth be told, Li Jinglong had indeed entertained the possibility that Xie Yu would try to intercept them and recover the ashes. His best chance would have been to ambush the Department of Exorcism on their way. This was the real reason they’d taken a boat to Hang Prefecture—their route was a trap Li Jinglong had laid for the jiao, hoping to lure him out and exterminate him once and for all.

Yet to Li Jinglong’s surprise, Xie Yu hadn’t shown himself. As the party neared their destination, Qiu Yongsi and Li Jinglong had both lowered their guard. Perhaps the injuries Xie Yu had suffered during their previous confrontation were too serious for him to come after them now. After entering Cloud Villa, Li Jinglong had felt even safer, certain Xie Yu would never dare encroach on the home of the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal.

Qiu Qiu wouldn’t usually be so complacent either. But after his unexpected meeting with Hongjun, the son of someone so dear to him, he had grown distracted. He’d assumed Xie Yu had been vanquished and thus hadn’t asked any further questions.

For once, Li Jinglong’s plans had backfired. Xie Yu had turned his elaborate schemes around on him, and he had become a victim of his own cleverness.

“What’s done is done.” Li Jinglong sighed. “There’s no use pointing fingers now. Can you take us into the tower?”

“I can’t go in,” Qiu Qiu replied. “The swarm of jiao lying in wait inside will bombard the entrance the moment I open the portal. I have to stay here to keep them from escaping. I can send you in, but remember, Li Jinglong—time flows differently inside.”

In his panic, Li Jinglong had indeed forgotten. “Then…if we want to find Hongjun and Yongsi, then complete the repairs to the barrier, how much time will we need?”

“I don’t know which level they’ve ended up on,” Qiu Qiu said, stroking his beard. “They should have landed on the ninth level, at the top. But the spiritual power here has been disturbed—they could be anywhere. If you can’t find them on the ninth level, you’ll have to look for them on every level below that. I don’t know how long it will take.”

“How big is each level?” Li Jinglong asked, growing more anxious. “Quickly.”

“There’s no need to rush. Even if you enter the tower three days from now, only fifteen minutes or so will have passed inside,” Qiu Qiu said. “Think it through before you go in.”

Qiu Qiu shook out his sleeves, and a scattering of bright beams crisscrossed in the air before him. They resolved into a blurry cross section of the Dragon-Quelling Tower.

“The ninth level is the smallest, only about a mu[12] in size,” he explained. “It’s where the Dragon-Quelling Spiritual Array is located—what you may know as the time barrier. The divine dragon Ye Ming, who once guarded this tower, resided there.”

Mergen was relieved. “One mu? That’s smaller than this villa. It’ll be easy to find them, then.”

“It won’t,” Qiu Qiu said. “The eighth level is nine times larger.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Let me guess… The seventh level is nine times the size of the eighth,” A-Tai murmured. “That would be almost a qing—the size of a small village.”[13]

“Correct. The sixth level would be seven hundred and twenty-nine mu, and the fifth level… Give me a second…” Qiu Qiu crouched down, grabbed a fallen branch, and began scrawling calculations into the dirt.

“Let’s not…” Li Jinglong kneaded his forehead.

“No, let’s,” Qiu Qiu said. “Even if we spend a full day on these calculations, practically no time will have passed in there.”

Please don’t put us through this, everyone begged internally.

Fifteen minutes later, the calculations were complete. “Forty-three million, forty-six thousand, seven hundred twenty-one mu—that’s the area of the second level.”

“It’s not that bad,” Li Jinglong managed, on the brink of passing out. “It’s just about the area of the Huainan Circuit.”

Ashina Adarvan was ready to tear his hair out. “You call that *not bad*?!”

Searching for two people in an area spanning forty million mu was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

“Look on the bright side,” Qiu Qiu said. “Maybe they landed on the ninth level, who knows?”

But given his track record of consistently landing on the most unfortunate of all possible outcomes, Li Jinglong was already prepared for the worst.

“Yongsi-ge should be trying to find his way up to the ninth level too, right?” Lu Xu asked. “We just need to—”

“Don’t pin your hopes on him,” Qiu Qiu said. “He’s never gone below the seventh level.” In the face of everyone’s shocked silence, Qiu Qiu added, “It’s not just him. I haven’t either!”

Li Jinglong was first to recover. “What about the time? How slowly does it flow inside the tower?”

“It’s hard to say,” Qiu Qiu said. “The last time Yongsi went in, one day inside the tower was equivalent to about forty days outside, but it changes depending on the strength of Ye Ming’s soul. A day inside the tower could be equal to as little as a month outside now.”

Li Jinglong turned to the group. “We can’t all go into the tower. We don’t know what could happen while we’re inside. An Lushan has retreated to Fanyang, but who knows when he’ll strike again. I’ll go.”

Qiu Qiu looked hesitant, brows tightly knit. Mergen glanced at him. “If there’s anything else you want to tell us, now would be a good time.”

The old man heaved a sigh. “After Xie Yu took Ye Ming’s corpse, he opened the portals from the eighth level down to the second. Countless jiao

have flooded up to the ninth level since, hoping to escape the tower. I'm afraid you'll be swarmed the moment you set foot inside."

"But…how did you and Yongsi enter the tower, then?" Ashina Adarvan asked.

"When Ye Ming was alive, the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal could enter and leave freely," Qiu Qiu explained. "After Ye Ming's death, the energy of his soul gradually weakened, and the jiao in the tower began to attack when I went inside. When I went in to fetch Yongsi twenty years ago, I barely managed to escape with my life."

"Wait." Lu Xu's brows drew together in confusion. "What did you just say?"

Li Jinglong shot him a look, warning him to not ask too many questions. After a moment of thought, he plucked out the most vital piece of information. "The jiao and dragons in the tower didn't attack Yongsi?" he asked.

Qiu Qiu nodded. "He was born in the tower, and he was still a child then. The jiao there… Perhaps they made an exception for him."

Everyone took a moment to digest this. Qiu Qiu continued, "If Yongsi and Hongjun aren't on the ninth level, they might be fine—but *you* might be surrounded as soon as you enter."

Li Jinglong was at his wits' end. However accidental in its execution, Xie Yu seemed to have hit on a flawless plan. He turned to A-Tai. "The sacred flame ring is with Li Guinian."

A-Tai nodded. "I entrusted it to him before we left."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

Before they'd left Chang'an, Li Jinglong made preparations in case Xie Yu followed them to Hang Prefecture or came crawling back to Chang'an while they were away. Li Guinian, though he wasn't technically a member of the Department, had agreed to stay in Chang'an as their agent. The moment Xie Yu appeared, he was to carry out their pre-agreed plan.

But at this point, Xie Yu was no longer their biggest concern—the enemy Li Jinglong was most worried about was An Lushan. Searching for

Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi might take as long as six months. If An Lushan decided to strike when everyone was inside the tower, the Department of Exorcism would be leaving the nation totally defenseless.

It was a harrowing choice. Li Jinglong contemplated at length before turning to the rest of the group.

“Lu Xu’s powers can be used to counter the heavenly demon,” Li Jinglong said. “They may be weaker than the heart lamp, but they’re better than nothing.”

“That’s true,” Mergen agreed. “Lu Xu and I will stay outside, then.”

“I’ll return to Chang’an,” Turandokht volunteered. “I can pass you information from the capital.”

Li Jinglong turned to A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan. After some thought, he said, “A-Tai will stay outside and work with Lu Xu and Mergen. Ashina Adarvan will come into the tower with me. Now let’s hurry up and move out!”

Chapter 130:
Deputy Chief

STAYING CLOSE to the smooth surface of the ice, Hongjun swung his body—left, right, left, right. Unconscious, Qiu Yongsi hung limply off him; the bottle stashed in his lapels teetered, about to slip out.

“Go!” Hongjun shouted. At the top of his next swing, he yanked his saber from the narrow fissure in the ice. He and Qiu Yongsi flew toward the opposite cliff.

Hongjun screeched as they hurtled up into the air. As they began to fall, he twisted and thrust his saber into the wall of the cliff, the flat of the blade to the sky. The tip pierced the stone, but just barely—it slid less than three inches in. The saber shuddered from the impact, the vibrations so intense Hongjun almost bit through his tongue, but supported both Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi’s weight. This, however, was finally too much for the bottle. It flew out of Qiu Yongsi’s lapels and whipped past Hongjun’s eyes.

What’s that?

By the time he realized the sparkling object was Ye Ming’s ashes, the bottle was free-falling toward the chasm. Hongjun yelped in alarm—but he had no way of catching it. To do so, he would have to let go of either Qiu Yongsi or the saber holding them up.

The bottle plunged toward the abyss, leaving a glowing trail in its wake. Hongjun’s gaze followed it, his mind a blank.

A hand shot out and snatched the bottle out of the air.

“Good heavens! What on earth are you doing, Hongjun?!” Qiu Yongsi shouted, half hysterical.

“You’re awake!” Hongjun exclaimed.

Looking down at the void beneath him, Qiu Yongsi immediately began to scream. “Where the hell are we?!”

“How should I know?” Hongjun snapped. “Stop screaming in my ear!”

Clutching Hongjun's arm, Qiu Yongsi clambered upward, kicking at empty air as he tried to find his footing. On the verge of losing his grip on the saber, Hongjun roared, "Don't move! Stay *still*!"

"We almost dropped the bottle!" Qiu Yongsi shouted. "If it falls down there, we're all screwed!"

Hongjun carefully glanced to the side, searching for another foothold. "I'm going to throw you over to that cliff."

Qiu Yongsi followed his gaze. There was a shallow ledge on the mountainside about ten feet away. "If you miss even by a little, there's no way I can climb up there!"

"Just shut up and do it!" Hongjun's arm was about to give out. He pushed off from the cliff face, building momentum again with a few swings. Then he released Qiu Yongsi, launching him over the abyss.

Qiu Yongsi's hands scrabbled as he almost slid down the cliff. At the last moment, his fingers gripped the edge, and he hauled himself up to standing.

Without Qiu Yongsi's dead weight hanging off him, Hongjun felt instantly lighter; he sighed in relief. He swung again and leapt over to the same ledge. Exhausted as he was, he would have plunged into the chasm if not for Qiu Yongsi scrambling to pull him up.

Now that they had somewhere they could plant their feet, the situation seemed much less dire. Hongjun dismissed his saber and brandished a throwing knife, crackling with flames.

"Don't!" Qiu Yongsi cried—too late. Hongjun had already melted the slab of ice lodged in the crack above them. A chunk of glacier the size of a small mountain dislodged and tumbled down the cliff, landing with a thunderous rumble.

The two stood for a moment in stunned silence. From afar, they heard a faint dragon's roar.

"Crap," Qiu Yongsi said. "I wonder which jiao we've woken up."

Hongjun gave Qiu Yongsi a look but said nothing. The quiet, static realm of snow and ice seemed to suddenly come to life: The wind picked

up, howling through the crevices of the mountain to pelt them with chunks of ice and snow.

“This wind is so strong!” Hongjun was struggling to breathe through the gale blasting them at full force.

“We need to get out of here!” Qiu Yongsi urged.

They squeezed through the crack Hongjun had cleared of ice and found themselves surrounded by a cerulean glow—they had found their way into a cave inside the glacier. As they made their way further inside, a faint light shone ahead of them. Spotting a raised section of the cave floor, Qiu Yongsi clambered up on all fours and dragged Hongjun up behind him.

“Where are we?” Hongjun asked, bewildered.

They emerged from the cave onto a hill blanketed with snow. A lone peak rose in the distance, topped with a pillar of blue light shooting up into the sky.

“The Prison of Bitter Cold,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “The second-lowest level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower. Something went wrong with the transportation array. Thank goodness we didn’t end up on the bottom level.”

“Oh,” Hongjun said. “So how do we get out of here?”

“That blue light is the array that will transport us to the third level,” Qiu Yongsi murmured. “After Ye Ming’s death, Xie Yu opened the portals linking the levels. The jiao once confined to the Prison of Bitter Cold have all flown upward through them. We’ll need to climb to the ninth level and repair the barrier there before we can leave.”

“Let’s go, then.” Hongjun marched ahead, taking the lead.

Qiu Yongsi sighed. “Wait, let’s rest first. Aren’t you tired? Hongjun?”

Hongjun stalked on without a word. Qiu Yongsi watched him for a while before following suit, his boots sinking into the snow and leaving a trail of deep footprints in his wake.

“This’ll take too long,” Qiu Yongsi called. “We have to look for another way to get there!”

Hongjun turned to shoot him a glare. “Well, *look* then!”

“Stop walking! Wait!” Qiu Yongsi called, eyes on the glowing blue pillar at the mountain’s summit. He noticed with surprise that several jiao were circling it, though they were merely tiny specks at this distance.

Hongjun stopped walking and followed his gaze.

“Hongjun?” Qiu Yongsi ventured.

Silence.

“What’s up with you? Are you upset? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Hongjun said.

“Then what is it?”

“What do you think?!” Hongjun finally exploded. “Do you know how dangerous that was? I barely managed to save your life, and the first thing you do is criticize me for not watching that stupid bottle!”

Understanding dawned on Qiu Yongsi. He’d been barely conscious when he’d said those things to Hongjun. He had no idea what had transpired while they were dangling in midair, but now that he thought back on it, it had seemed rather perilous. He hastily apologized. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Hongjun ignored him, striding forward with a scowl on his face.

Amused, Qiu Yongsi asked, “Shall I kowtow to you? Or you can beat me up if that’ll make you feel better.”

“No thanks,” Hongjun grumbled. “I’m sure the chief will come and save me. *You* can stay here.”

“Then I’ll let Jinglong beat me up when he gets here. How does that sound?”

Hongjun’s displeasure was already fading. “Will they land here, too, when they enter the tower?”

Li Jinglong would be safer if he came with Lu Xu, seeing as the white deer could fly. Even so, they would still have to navigate those cliffs.

“No,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Grandpa will send them directly to the ninth level. If they’re looking for us, they’ll have to descend the tower level by level—that is, if they can evade the jiao’s attacks. We can wait for them at the portal… Hongjun? Why are you barefoot?”

Qiu Yongsi had just noticed Hongjun wore no shoes and was clad only in summer robes. “You can wear my boots,” he offered.

“I’m not cold.” Hongjun looked back toward the horizon. “Let’s go.”

Before Hongjun could summon his power, a dragon roared again, this one from a different direction than the blue pillar of light. Hongjun edged backward, but Qiu Yongsi turned to face the source of the sound.

“This tower wouldn’t happen to be infested with jiao like Xie Yu, would it?” asked Hongjun.

“They’re worse,” Qiu Yongsi murmured. “But I think the most powerful ones have all gone up to the ninth level… Hongjun, just follow me.”

“To our deaths?” Hongjun quipped.

“Please. I have to make sure you’re still in one piece when I hand you back to the chief,” Qiu Yongsi said, chuckling. “Or I’ll be dead meat.”

The gale-force winds had turned into a snowstorm that raged as they slowly journeyed toward an icy forest. Qiu Yongsi led the way, blocking the wind and snow and clearing the path for Hongjun. When he looked back, teeth chattering, he saw that Hongjun seemed completely fine.

“It’s f-freezing,” he stuttered out. “Hongjun, aren’t you cold?”

Expressionlessly, Hongjun withdrew the phoenix feather from his inner robes.

But of course, Qiu Yongsi thought. He stepped back, staying as close to Hongjun as possible as they trudged onward. The phoenix feather, though it worked wonders against the cold, was useless against the howling winds, which only subsided after they entered the shelter of the pine forest.

“Get ready,” Qiu Qiu said. “I’m sending you in first.”

“You’ll be inside the tower for half a month at least,” Mergen said.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” Lu Xu replied. “Perhaps they’ll be waiting on the ninth level.”

The group watched as Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan stepped into the middle of a transportation array.

“Be careful,” Turandokht said, brows knit with concern.

“I will be—don’t worry,” Li Jinglong replied.

“Saozi is talking to *me*. Quite the narcissist, aren’t you?” Ashina Adarvan grinned. “She hardly knows you.”

Li Jinglong thought it best not to respond.

“We’ll handle our part of the plan,” A-Tai said.

Li Jinglong nodded. Qiu Qiu recited an incantation, and the transportation array gradually illuminated, engulfing the platform in blue light.

“Who knows how long it’ll take the chief to come back,” Mergen said.

A-Tai patted him on the shoulder. “You’ve got this.”

As the array shone brighter, they heard Li Jinglong announce from its center, “Henceforth, I’m naming Mergen deputy chief of the Department of Demonic Exorcism. I hereby entrust my official seals to you, Mergen. The department is in your hands.”

Li Jinglong’s seals, representative of his rank as the Marquis of Yardang and chief of the Department of Exorcism, shot out of the array, streaking through the air like shooting stars.

“What?!” Ashina Adarvan, Lu Xu, and A-Tai all protested. “He gets promoted just like that?”

Mergen smiled in resignation. He caught the seals and tapped two fingers to his brow in a salute.

“Let’s grab a drink when I get out!” Li Jinglong called, his voice fading.

“O shifting sands of time; the blue seas turn to mulberry fields with your passage; the stars wheel in the dark skies—” Qiu Qiu threw out his arms, and the spiritual power of the array reached its peak. “Go!”

The array condensed into a pillar of blue light shooting toward the clouds, swallowing Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan in the blink of an eye.

Yet in the next moment, the array exploded with a sweeping force so strong it razed the villa’s backyard to the ground. A black jiao surged out of

the column of light, green blood trailing from wounds all over his body and splashing onto the ground.

Mergen's expression shifted. "After him!" he barked.

Before the words were out of his mouth, Lu Xu was shifting into the white deer, and A-Tai whipped out his fan. Mergen vaulted onto the white deer's back, and the three leapt into the sky in pursuit of the black jiao.

Xie Yu twisted through the clouds with an enraged snarl, blood streaming from the cracked scales across his body. Mergen's nailhead arrows whistled through the air, harrying the jiao and darting through the green trail of blood in his wake.

Xie Yu shot up into the clouds and made a sharp turn, plummeting toward the ground with a roar. The three exorcists dove after him.

As they hurtled down, true dragons in a multitude of hues appeared in the air around Xie Yu, followed closely by qilin, phoenixes, and other mythical beasts. More and more creatures streamed out of Cloud Villa to surround Xie Yu as Qiu Qiu's lips moved in an unending incantation.

The black jiao made no attempt to escape, letting the beasts—projections summoned with spiritual power—tear and rend his flesh as he crashed into West Lake. His fall raised raging waves that swept toward the shore, tinged green with his blood.

As Mergen watched him disappear below the water, countless thoughts flashed through his mind. *This is the second time he's tricked us!*

Qiu Qiu and Turandokht raced out of the villa to find the gray wolf, the white deer, and A-Tai on the banks, staring at the roiling surface of West Lake in silence.

Mergen growled in rage, "He escaped again!"

Inside the tower, there was a flash of white light. A whirring, glowing disk materialized in the air, from which Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan were disgorged, screaming as they plummeted to the ground from ten feet up. Somersaulting in midair, Li Jinglong landed neatly on his feet, sword in hand. Ashina Adarvan skidded on his heels before smoothly regaining his balance.

A dark and gloomy sky loomed over a desolate expanse of earth riddled with thorny brambles. At the center of the space stood a towering pagoda, its top stretching into the clouds. Jiao—tens of thousands of them—filled the air as far as the eye could see, roaring and rumbling as they circled the tower. Black mist swirled with them, rising in a dark, spiraling cloud. The moment the transportation array had flashed beneath them, the thousands of jiao swarmed down toward Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan.

"Fuck," a stunned Ashina Adarvan cursed. "What… What the hell is going on here?"

It took a bare moment for Li Jinglong to issue his orders: "Run!"

The sky gradually darkened over the snowy forest. Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun sat cross-legged under a tree, snowflakes fluttering around them. They were warming themselves with the phoenix feather, which they'd placed on a slab of stone. The heat had melted all the snow in a circular patch around the rock, so Qiu Yongsi laid his cape on the ground for Hongjun to sit on.

"Are you *that* cold?" Hongjun asked.

"I'm a southerner—it's not as cold here!" Qiu Yongsi complained.

"You didn't seem worried about it back in Dunhuang."

"That's because I wore a million layers and brought a bunch of spiritual devices with me after receiving the chief's letter."

Hongjun rubbed his hands together, studying Qiu Yongsi. He suddenly found his companion rather comical. Here he was wearing the majestic armor of the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal, yet he was such a wuss.

"Are you still upset?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

"Not anymore."

After a moment of contemplation, Qiu Yongsi ventured, "Hongjun, can I say something? Since the chief's not here to beat me up."

"What is it?" Hongjun eyed him warily.

“It’s not what you’re thinking!” Qiu Yongsi frantically waved a hand. “I like girls—pretty girls, cute girls, kind and caring girls!”

Hongjun knew Qiu Yongsi often visited Pingkang Ward with A-Tai, but despite his friendliness with women, he rarely crossed the line. And he doted on both Hongjun and Lu Xu like little brothers, even asking them about their love lives from time to time—something the other members of the Department of Exorcism rarely bothered to do.

Still, Hongjun figured he shouldn’t let his guard down—who knew when Qiu Yongsi might change his mind. Like Mergen, who had sworn with such conviction that Lu Xu couldn’t get him hard…

“I’m being serious,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Hongjun. Thank you, and I’m sorry.”

Hongjun looked at him, exasperated. “If you want to thank me, hurry up and think of a way to get us out of here!”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Every day we spend here is a year in the mortal world!”

““It’s not that long anymore,” Qiu Yongsi assured him. “For every half day in here, only about twenty days will pass outside.”

“The chief will go crazy after ten,” Hongjun said.

“You’re right,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “I’ll get us out of here as soon as possible, believe me.” He chuckled and said wryly, “At least you have people waiting for you out there. Unlike me.”

Hongjun’s heart twisted at these words. He was suddenly at a loss. “Don’t say that, Yongsi-ge. You’re important to all of us.”

Qiu Yongsi smiled, studying Hongjun. “That’s why I’m grateful to you, Hongjun.”

They stared at each other for a while in silence, until Hongjun offered him a smile in return. “You’re welcome, Yongsi-ge.”

Chapter 131:
The Akasha Sigil

“WHERE’S XIE YU?!”

“What the hell happened here?!”

Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan dodged the jiao swarming toward them as they sprinted away from the array. Every one of these creatures was as huge as Xie Yu, roaring menacingly as they bombarded the two exorcists with gouts of flames and frost no matter how they tried to scramble away. Every so often, two jiao collided in midair and proceeded to brutally tear into one another’s flesh, sending sheets of pungent blood raining down.

Amid the chaos, Li Jinglong coolly surveyed their surroundings. The only safe area seemed to be that pagoda soaring above the clouds, encircled by its collar of thorny vines. Though the skies teemed with jiao blasting bolts of lightning in all directions, none of their attacks had succeeded in getting close to the building.

“Into the pagoda!”

Li Jinglong broke toward the building, Ashina Adarvan only a step behind. They’d almost reached the walls when a jiao caught up to Ashina Adarvan. Li Jinglong whirled; tossing his sword from one hand to the other, he gathered the power of the heart lamp into a glowing sphere in his right palm, which he hurled toward their foes like a meteor.

The ball tore into the sky in a streak of blinding light, and the swarm of jiao scattered to dodge it. One breathed a burst of flames that narrowly missed its target, grazing Ashina Adarvan’s side. As he rolled forward to evade the attack, he slid past Li Jinglong, who grabbed his arm and hauled him up. Together, they made a mad dash for the foot of the pagoda.

Racing up the steps, Ashina Adarvan shouted, “How do we get in?”

“Open up!” Li Jinglong rained punches on the walls of the pagoda with all his might.

Provoked by his attack, more and more jiao thronged toward the foot of the building, hissing and growling at the exorcists as they sized up their prey.

“Let us in!” Ashina Adarvan roared.

“It doesn’t have a door!” Li Jinglong yelled.

“Wait!” Ashina Adarvan had noticed a faintly glowing sigil on one of the walls, almost identical to the one on the gates to the Department of Exorcism. “Isn’t this—?”

“Figure it out yourself!” Li Jinglong slashed his Sword of Wisdom through the air. The blade radiated a white light that warded off the jiao swarming toward them, but only for a moment. As yet another jiao enveloped in a blue glow swooped down, a gate appeared on the wall with a faint hum. Caught off guard, they tumbled through the entrance.

The gate shut behind them. Another sigil materialized on its surface in a burst of light that repelled the swarm of jiao hissing toward the pagoda’s base. When the jiao’s attacks proved fruitless, the creatures shot up into the sky once again, making their way to the top of the pagoda.

In the pin-drop silence that followed, Li Jinglong raised his sword, using its glow to illuminate a small radius around them. Fortunately, they hadn’t been thrust into some other unknown space within the tower—this pagoda was exactly what it looked like.

They found themselves in a spacious room with stone-tiled floors. Another array—possibly an exit—occupied its center, while a flight of stairs on the side seemed to lead toward the upper tiers. They looked up, then down at the array.

“This must lead us down to the eighth level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower,” Ashina Adarvan said, studying the sigil. “It’s strange, though. Why does it look so similar to the one at our place?”

In fact, this array had a long history and was best understood via the parable of how the immense Mount Sumeru could be contained within the infinitesimal mustard seed.

After pondering a while, Li Jinglong hazarded a guess. No one knew who had built the Dragon-Quelling Tower, but Xie Yu had been confined

here for centuries; naturally, he must have learned this sigil. After escaping the tower, he had taught the nine-tailed celestial fox this spiritual technique, which she later used to create the akasha realm containing the blood pool. After her defeat, Qiu Yongsi—who'd already had an approximate idea of how the technique worked—had been inspired to harness it to hide the Department of Exorcism.

Ashina Adarvan, who hadn't yet joined their group then, had been oblivious to this connection.

Nodding at Li Jinglong's brief explanation, Ashina Adarvan strode to the foot of the stairs and looked up. "Got it," he said. "Are we going up or down?"

Li Jinglong glanced up as well. Something seemed to be glowing at the peak of the pagoda. After some thought, he said, "Now that we're inside the tower, time should flow at the same pace for us as it does for them, so we aren't in a rush. Let's go up for a look first."

"I just worry the others will be waiting for us too long outside the tower," Ashina Adarvan said.

"Keep an eye on the time," Li Jinglong reminded him.

Before entering, Qiu Qiu had given them a spiritual device he'd called a cosmic wheel. Contrary to its name, this item wasn't powered by cosmic energies, but by a mainspring that must be wound every twenty-four hours. Its dial consisted of two concentric rings that spun slowly, marking the passage of time in daily and yearly increments. It was the work of a master craftsman, something all previous Dragon-Vanquishing Immortals had brought with them into the tower.

Now that the flow of time here had been tampered with, this wheel could only be used to ascertain the passage of time inside the tower. Ashina Adarvan fished it out and glanced at it.

"Fifteen minutes have passed," he reported.

We have to hurry, Li Jinglong thought, taking the stairs two at a time.

The second tier of the pagoda was another spacious room. Wooden horses and other figurines lay strewn over the ground, along with a child's clothes and some blankets. The room gave off a musty smell, as if its owner

had left some time ago. A baby's crib stood to one side of the room, and a dressing table was set in one corner, on top of which lay a box of rouge and powder and a wooden comb.

Li Jinglong walked over for a look. The rouge and powder in the box had yet to dry out. "This is where Yongsi lived as a child, I think. Let's keep moving."

The third tier and above housed a dining hall, additional bedrooms, and more. It seemed Yaoji had stayed here until the hundredth day after Qiu Yongsi's birth—an important occasion—before exiting the tower.

Ashina Adarvan frowned in confusion but asked no questions. They continued to climb. The higher up they went, the brighter their surroundings became. Li Jinglong sheathed his sword.

As they ascended the stairs to the ninth tier, a voice rang out: "You're back?"

A luminescent image of a man stood facing a ball of light. Dragon horns sprouted from his head, and his robes billowed behind him. The manifestation resembled Yuan Kun's soul when it took human form, but for the bright glow radiating from him, as if he had set himself alight. Hovering before him was a yin-yang sphere, which rotated slowly within the halo of his spiritual power.

"I have less than forty days left," he murmured.

No walls divided the topmost tier of the pagoda; their line of sight was only broken by nine pillars holding up the roof. The yin-yang sphere pulsed with light that expanded outward in wave upon wave. Less than fifty feet away, countless jiao circled the pagoda's peak, hissing and growling. Their bodies crackled with lightning, waiting for the spiritual array holding them captive to collapse and set them free.

Li Jinglong came to stand in front of the man and bowed slightly.

"I can't see," the man said in response. "You're not Yongsi. Who are you?"

Taking a deep breath, Li Jinglong ventured, "Lord Ye Ming?"

Lightning flashed and thunder boomed in the skies, growing more intense by the moment. The yin-yang sphere wobbled in its next revolution,

as though knocked askew by the jiao's attacks. Li Jinglong slowly drew the Sword of Wisdom. Shining with the same power as the heart lamp, it stopped the onslaught of jiao outside, forcing them back from the pagoda.

"The Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha?" the man said. "Why are *you* here?"

Li Jinglong looked at him sharply.

The jiao's retreat had relieved some of the pressure on the yin-yang sphere. The man released a burst of spiritual power that transformed into a glowing breeze, swirling around Li Jinglong. "I see."

"You're—" Li Jinglong began.

"You are correct. I am Ye Ming," the man said. "The dragon presiding over the skies in all six directions, as well as the past, present, and future. You may call me the Dragon of Time if you prefer. I thought Yongsi had returned, but now I see that it is the heir of Acalanatha. For coming here and fixing my mistakes, you have my gratitude."

"Where is Xie Yu?" Li Jinglong asked.

"He escaped once again," Ye Ming replied. "Through the transportation array you used, just before it could close. The moment he entered the tower, he knew more of your allies would soon arrive."

Defeated again! Li Jinglong could have slapped himself across the face. *I underestimated our enemy.*

"Tell me everything from the beginning," he said. "Or I'm afraid I won't know what to do."

"This will be a long, long tale," Ye Ming said calmly. "But seeing as the last remnants of my soul will soon dissipate, there's no harm in telling it to you."

The blizzard reached a lull after dark, and the world fell into silence. Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun both slept, leaning against the rock they'd laid the phoenix feather on.

Without sun or moon, there was no knowing what time it was when Hongjun jerked awake.

Qiu Yongsi roused as well. "Bad dream?"

Hongjun shook his head.

"A while ago, you were having nightmares every day," Qiu Yongsi said.

“How do you know?”

“I heard you,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “Has it gotten better since Lu Xu looked you over?”

Hongjun hummed in response. Actually, he hadn’t had any nightmares for a long time—ever since he’d gotten together with Li Jinglong. The heart lamp suppressed the demonic energy roiling in his body; sleeping beside him, he felt as safe as could be. Even now, he could sense that Li Jinglong had unleashed the powers of the heart lamp somewhere far away, which could only mean one thing: Li Jinglong had come to save him.

“I’m just hungry,” Hongjun said.

“We’ll find something to eat soon,” Qiu Yongsi promised. “I’ve never been here before either.”

“What do we do now?”

“We should seek out the dragon on this level and enlist his help in flying us up. Aside from the bottommost level, there’s one dragon king guarding each floor. They monitor the jiao confined within the tower and maintain the barriers.”

Recalling what Qiu Yongsi had told him about the dragons—that they had been locked in here after violating the laws of heaven—Hongjun couldn’t help but ask, “What did the dragons do wrong?”

“They murdered humans.” Qiu Yongsi adjusted his armor. “Let’s go. We need to hurry.”

Yawning, Hongjun rose and trailed behind Qiu Yongsi. “What about Ye Ming?”

“Ye Ming? He did nothing wrong,” Qiu Yongsi said. “He merely fulfilled his promise to imprison the jiao here in this tower so they would stop terrorizing the Divine Land.”

“But who built the tower?”

“No idea,” Qiu Yongsi said. “I’ve only spoken to Ye Ming a few times, and those just briefly. I was too little when I lived here, and when I grew older, I only sought him out to ask questions. We seldom discussed other topics.”

“So we just need to deliver his ashes to the topmost level, right?”

“His ashes and soul need to fuse before his soul dissipates,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “That’s the only way we can restore the time barrier. We’re really lucky not to have fallen into the bottommost level.”

“What’s in there?”

“The abyss,” Qiu Yongsi said grimly. “Where no light shines and no time passes. All the jiao here should’ve been locked down there. Once you’ve fallen into the abyss, there is no escape.”

After traversing the forest, they emerged into a massive graveyard. The winds picked up again, building into a snowstorm that blasted straight at their faces, its howls like the mighty roars of a dragon.

As they trekked forward, a voice thundered, “Who dares disturb my slumber?!”

“Weren’t you already awake?” Hongjun looked up. “I heard you roaring ages ago.”

Qiu Yongsi hurriedly shushed him.

“Offspring of fowl, you dare speak to me with such disrespect? Begone from this tower!”

As the frigid breath of the dragon rushed toward them, Qiu Yongsi cried, “Dragon King! Please, be appeased!”

Hongjun summoned his pentacolor sacred light. The phoenix feather seemed to sense danger too, for it blazed red and conjured a ring of flames that encircled Hongjun, shielding him from the blizzard.

It was too late to beg for mercy. Qiu Yongsi twirled his riverscape brush between his fingers and drew a swift line toward himself, dragging Hongjun and the enraged, growling dragon into an ink painting with him.

Counting his brief visit to *The Jataka of the Deer King* back in Dunhuang, this was Hongjun’s second time being yanked into a painting, and it still felt incredibly odd. The blizzard that had been sweeping toward him from all sides was now coming at him from only one direction—the top. It did make things simpler.

As the howling winds collided with Hongjun's shield of sacred light, Qiu Yongsi waved his brush again. "Open!"

Their surroundings dissolved, and both exorcists returned to the real world. A massive blue dragon hovered above them, who threw his head back in an earthshaking roar.

"It… Um…" Hongjun stammered, looking with alarm at the obsidian flames flickering in the dragon king's eyes.

Qiu Yongsi, too, was shocked. "Dragon King!"

The dragon king swooped toward them once again. Hongjun expanded his sacred light, scooping it upward to erect a barrier of snow ten feet high. The dragon's breath hit it head-on, turning the snow into a wall of solid ice.

While Qiu Yongsi frantically looked for cover, Hongjun shouted, "He's descended into demonhood! Do something, quick!"

"Look for his reverse scale—the one at the base of his throat! That's his weak spot!" Qiu Yongsi yelled back.

Hongjun took a glance between countering the dragon's attacks. Where the dragon's reverse scale should've been, dark mist curled up, like a parasitic monster latched to the dragon's throat.

"Can you fly?" Qiu Yongsi called to Hongjun.

The dragon king lunged; the pair scattered in different directions. The dragon dove after them, tearing up the landscape as it tried to pin them down.

"I can't!" Hongjun yelled.

"Then I'll give you a boost!" Qiu Yongsi said.

"Look out!" Hongjun yelped as the dragon's jaws snapped toward Qiu Yongsi.

Qiu Yongsi didn't waver. He swished his brush through the air, and all three of them were sucked into a painting once again. "Rise!"

Spreading his arms wide, Qiu Yongsi executed a somersault in midair. Their surroundings, haphazardly drawn in ink, flipped with him.

Hongjun found himself upside down, plummeting from the ground into the sky at the edge of the painting.

“Open!” Qiu Yongsi roared.

The image dissolved. The world once again shifted around Hongjun, leaving him suspended in midair. This change in dimensionality did nothing to slow his fall—except that instead of tumbling into the sky, he was now careening toward the ground. Qiu Yongsi leapt into the sky below Hongjun, where he battled the dragon king.

Hongjun merged his throwing knives into his saber as he plunged downward. Making full use of his falling velocity, he shot toward the dragon king and slashed at his neck.

“Nice!” Qiu Yongsi called.

The dragon king tossed his head, blasting frigid ice and raging flames at Qiu Yongsi, who, acting as bait, did nothing to defend himself. Just before the attack reached Qiu Yongsi, Hongjun stabbed his blade into the dragon’s chest over his heart.

In one strike, the saber sliced the parasite away from the dragon king’s body, releasing a monstrous cloud of black mist. The dragon’s frigid breath fizzled, and his eyes lost their luster as his hulking body collapsed to the ground. The black mist surged toward Hongjun. Qiu Yongsi bounded atop the fallen dragon king’s head and leapt up, catching Hongjun mid-fall.

As they spun through the air, Qiu Yongsi swished his brush once more. “Gather!”

The painting came to life again, swallowing the mist as it rolled toward them.

Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun screamed as they hurtled toward the ground and crashed into the snowy plains. White snow sprayed from Hongjun’s mouth when he coughed. Qiu Yongsi staggered to his feet and made a beeline for the dragon king, lying limp on his side.

“Dragon King!”

Hongjun followed, studying the beast curiously.

This was his first time seeing a true dragon in the flesh. Chong Ming had often told him tales of the enmity between the phoenix and dragon

clans—the two had waged a devastating war against each other many years ago. From what Hongjun had seen, this dragon didn't seem nearly as powerful as Chong Ming. He'd collapsed after merely blasting them with his breath a few times. Whereas Xie Yu—a mere jiao, who by all measures should have been weaker than a dragon king—had heavily injured Chong Ming two centuries since. Something wasn't right here.

Chapter 132:
Xie Yu's Life Story

"DRAGON-VANQUISHING IMMORTAL…"

A full-body shudder ran through the dragon king. He lay on his side, blood streaming from the gash above his heart.

"To whom do I speak?" Qiu Yongsi inquired politely.

"The young Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal…" the dragon king said. "I've heard about you. You're…Yaoji's child."

"Yaoji?" Qiu Yongsi asked in confusion. "My mother's name was Li Shunying."

"She gave birth to you here after A-Chuang's death," the dragon king continued as if he hadn't heard. "On the…ninth level, Ye Ming bestowed some of his energy upon you."

"You don't know this dragon?" Hongjun asked.

Qiu Yongsi shook his head, befuddled. "I've never gone below the seventh level," he said. "How may I address you, Dragon King?"

"It's been too long," the dragon king intoned. "I can no longer remember…"

Hongjun pointed upward, reminding Qiu Yongsi that they had to get a move on. Qiu Yongsi quickly relayed their predicament to the dragon king.

Halfway through his account, the dragon king cut in. "You've recovered Ye Ming's ashes?" Qiu Yongsi showed him the bottle. "I'll fly you up to the third level now."

"Can you do that?" Hongjun glanced doubtfully at the massive wound above the dragon king's heart.

"Xie Yu polluted me with demonic energy when he escaped the abyss," the dragon king explained. "This is nothing serious. I've lived for

many, many centuries, and my demise is imminent… I already feel much better without that thing on me. Come, climb on."

"Let me dress that wound for you first," Hongjun suggested.

Despite his offer, he didn't have much medicine on him, and even if he had, he wasn't sure how to treat a dragon. He'd only offered to help because the wound looked so awful.

"Here, use my cape," Qiu Yongsi said.

Hongjun took it, then wedged his fingers into the dragon king's wound and slowly peeled back the edges to inspect it. A dragon's heart was completely different from that of a human, or any other animal for that matter. It comprised twelve chambers in total. Most of them were rotten, giving off a rancid odor. Hongjun moved gingerly for fear that he'd accidentally rupture the dragon king's heart and cause him to lose even more blood.

Dragon blood was a deadly poison, but Hongjun—protected by his sacred light—wasn't deterred in the slightest. He withdrew a needle and some thread from his pouch and began stitching the gaping wound closed.

"Time flows differently here," the dragon said as he kept still under Hongjun's needle. "Don't waste your time on me."

"It's fine," Hongjun said. "I have to treat you before we go on."

Qiu Yongsi watched them quietly from the side.

Hongjun had been frantic about spending too much time in the tower because he feared being separated from Li Jinglong for eternity. But now that he'd sensed Li Jinglong in the tower, he was certain they'd meet again. His worries were no longer so consuming.

The dragon king glanced here and there as Hongjun worked, his eyes as huge as carriage wheels.

"How did Xie Yu escape the first time?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

"He wasn't originally in the abyss. He was cast down there after his first attempt to escape the tower. You of all people surely know the crimes of the jiao imprisoned there, Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal."

“They rose against the dragon kings in this tower and attempted to break out of their prison,” Qiu Yongsi said.

“Precisely,” the dragon king rumbled. “Most jiao confined within this tower will eventually be freed, once they’ve served their sentence—but not the criminals who attacked the barrier in an attempt to escape this tower and were cast into the abyss as punishment.”

Hands stained with the dragon’s blood, Hongjun asked, “How long was Xie Yu’s sentence originally?”

“That, you will have to ask Ye Ming,” the dragon king said slowly. “Xie Yu is the only jiao who was born in this tower.”

As Hongjun stitched up the wounds over the dragon king’s heart, he learned that the Dragon-Quelling Tower—which constituted an entirely separate realm within the mortal world—was made up of two distinct zones. The second through ninth levels were a prison where errant jiao were confined, while the bottommost level of the tower was a world in itself. In the abyss, time came to a standstill; the jiao sentenced there were condemned for a lifetime, doomed to face the eternal darkness alone.

“If so many jiao are locked in here, why is Xie Yu their only offspring?” Hongjun fished out some of the medicinal powder he always carried, which helped stimulate blood flow and regrow muscles. He sprinkled some of the medicine on the fresh sutures. After a moment of hesitation, he fished out a pill Chong Ming had given him, crushed it between his fingers, and spread the additional medicine evenly over the wound.

“Jiao cannot give birth,” Qiu Yongsi said. “They have not overcome their heavenly tribulations. Nor have they been formally acknowledged by a human.”

“Formally acknowledged?” Hongjun echoed. He had a vague recollection of Chong Ming saying something similar, though he couldn’t remember when.

Qiu Yongsi glanced at him. “If you want to know about Xie Yu’s life here, you first have to understand what jiao are.” He and Hongjun worked together to wrap his cape around the dragon’s neck, and Hongjun leapt onto the creature’s back to secure it with a knot.

“I feel much better,” the dragon king said, although his blood was already seeping through the cloth. “Allow me to take you there now.”

Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun climbed up onto the dragon king’s head. He slowly rose into the air and took off toward the distance.

“Well then, what are jiao?” Hongjun asked.

“Jiao are beings transformed by a dragon’s soul,” the dragon king answered. “Before that, they might have been snakes, lizards, or fish. After gaining spiritual power, they become aquatic creatures with one goal in life: to become a dragon.”

“Since they come into being through a dragon’s power,” Qiu Yongsi added, “they cannot reproduce. They can merely cultivate until they become dragons. Only then can they sire offspring.”

Understanding dawned on Hongjun. Both dragon and phoenix were revered by all beings, but the dragon clan—though small in number—reigned supreme. While jiao did not mate to bear children, dragons were inherently licentious beings. In fact, out of the nine sons of the dragon, Baxia was the progeny of a dragon and a turtle, while Chiwen was the product of a dragon and a fish. Unlike jiao, these half-dragon offspring were still considered a part of the dragon clan.

Jiao, on the other hand, were born not from the mating habits of dragons, but from their deaths. Dragons usually met lonesome ends, their corpses either sinking into rivers and lakes or lying crumpled between the peaks of mountains. Their powerful souls, unextinguished even after their passing, slowly dispersed into the forests and flowed into the waters. The aquatic creatures who had the good fortune to imbibe a portion of the dragon’s spirit underwent a miraculous transformation, shedding their skin like snakes before gaining the serpentine bodies and formidable powers of newborn jiao. At that point they’d begin cultivating with a single aim in mind—to transform into a dragon.

Such power came with a price. After becoming a jiao, they could no longer bear offspring through intercourse, whether within their species or not. This was because jiao were, in essence, incomplete beings.

The dragon clan had dominated the world during the primordial era. But after countless wars with both ancient immortals and yao, many

dragons had met their demise. This, in turn, gave life to a growing number of jiao who terrorized the Divine Land. At last, it was an ancient immortal who reached an agreement with the dragon clan—he would build the Dragon-Quelling Tower and imprison all these errant jiao within it. The seven dragon kings would voluntarily take up residence in the tower and act as their wardens.

"When was this?" Hongjun asked.

"A long, long time ago…" the dragon king mused, flying toward the far-off pillar of light. "Around when Yu the Great was combating the Great Flood in the mortal world."

His answer surprised Hongjun—that was millennia ago!

"I heard the jiao's sentences span over a thousand years," Qiu Yongsi said.

"One day in the tower is equivalent to one year in the mortal world," the dragon king said. "The ancient immortal hoped this interval would give humans time to grow stronger through cultivation, so they wouldn't have to fear the swarm of jiao locked inside the tower."

Hongjun mentally calculated the time and boggled. A thousand years in the tower would equal hundreds of thousands of years in the mortal world—the release of these jiao would only happen in the far, far future. What would the human race even look like when that day came? But he was still curious about one thing: "But then, how was Xie Yu born?"

"It was an accident," the dragon king said, seemingly lost in thought.

For the jiao held captive inside the tower, it hadn't been that long since their imprisonment. Only a few millennia had passed in the mortal world since the time of Yu the Great—a little over a decade inside the tower. After the tower was built, Ye Ming, as its highest authority, guarded the ninth level. This ancient dragon god, who'd been born before Pangu divided heaven and earth, possessed the primordial ability to control and manipulate time.

This ability, however, had also led to his downfall.

Thanks to his efforts, all beings within the world of the tower perceived the flow of time differently—save for himself, for whom time

remained unchanged. Ever since the tower was built, he'd lived alone on the ninth level, spending what amounted to several millennia without a single other soul to keep him company.

"How lonely," Hongjun said. For some reason, he was reminded of Chong Ming's solitary existence at Yaojin Palace.

The dragon king hummed. "Many troubles in this world are the result of an unoccupied mind—bad things happen when a person is idle too long."

Qiu Yongsi considered this in silence.

And so Ye Ming had found ways to occupy his time. On occasion, he would descend to the second level, then travel slowly up from there. He measured every square inch of land in the tower and counted the number of steps in every place that had them: mountains, palaces, forests of gravestones and memorial tablets… When that was done, he turned to counting trees and stones. Just when he was about to start numbering the grains of sand on the ground, he met a jiao in the forests on the sixth level.

"Was she Xie Yu's mother?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

Hongjun's mouth twitched. "You don't know any of this?"

"Well, Ye Ming never told me these things!"

"All jiao and dragons are male," the dragon king said.

"Why?" Hongjun asked.

"Dragons and jiao are both creatures born from yang energy," the dragon king explained. "In a similar vein, the shapeshifting sea monsters called shen are all female, as they are creatures of yin energy. Humans are unlike us yao—both yin and yang energies are balanced within you."

Ye Ming had been alone for too long. He was desperate for companionship, and the jiao had taken advantage of that. Perhaps he'd hoped merely to escape his prison with Ye Ming's help, or perhaps he genuinely admired the dragon's handsome appearance. Whatever his motivation, this unnamed jiao stole a bit of Ye Ming's power and attempted to break free of the tower. Upon discovering the jiao's plot, the seven other dragon kings executed him on the spot. His body exploded at the moment of his death, leaving behind a bloody lump of flesh—the offspring of the jiao's body and Ye Ming's soul.

“That was Xie Yu,” Ye Ming concluded calmly.

“He’s the child of your soul,” Li Jinglong said, regarding him solemnly.

“I never told anyone outside the tower about this,” Ye Ming said. “Not even the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal—to him, Xie Yu was my adoptive son.”

“What happened after that?” Li Jinglong asked. “Why does he hate you so much?”

Before they’d come to West Lake, Li Jinglong had thought the problem of Xie Yu was largely resolved. Now he had a feeling things weren’t so simple.

“Both his fathers were guilty, but he was innocent,” Ye Ming said. “Although everyone objected, I took him in and raised him here on the ninth level. The other dragon kings never spoke a word to him about his past, but Xie Yu was so obviously different from the other jiao, who were born cruel and violent…”

Ye Ming sighed. “No, Xie Yu was more human. Like all young men, he was eager to leave this tower and see the world. When he was young and naive, he tried, once, to run away from home. But his home was far from ordinary, and his father was more than just his father.”

Perched on the railing of the stairs, Ashina Adarvan sighed, his brows drawn low. Li Jinglong remained silent as he gazed toward the horizon.

“His actions angered the other dragon kings,” Ye Ming went on, his voice low. “Xie Yu was merely a disobedient child testing his limits, but his actions emboldened the jiao held captive inside the tower. I had no choice but to cast him into the abyss, where no light shines and no time exists, and where no other living beings reside, save for those cruel jiao. Nothing exists in that land of ruin besides darkness and silence. In the absence of time, one can never escape the abyss. Xie Yu was doomed to grow old and die there.”

“And yet you couldn’t help but release him in the end,” Li Jinglong guessed.

“This is too cruel a fate for a child who has neither gazed at the mountains and rivers of the land, nor seen its flowers and trees, its birds and beasts. He was born in a prison and destined to die in it,” Ye Ming replied. “As his father, I am guilty of many crimes, the first of which was my failure of self-control that led to his birth.”

“Some children are grateful to their parents for bestowing life upon them,” Li Jinglong said slowly, “while others aren’t.”

“Indeed,” Ye Ming said. “And that is why my second and greatest mistake was releasing him.”

Li Jinglong was silent. He thought suddenly of Hongjun, and how Yang Guozhong had looked at him when they met. Hongjun had been born to expel the demon seed from his father’s body, while Xie Yu had been born of his father’s attempt to alleviate his profound loneliness. In a way, both had come into existence under similar circumstances.

“When I released Xie Yu, I asked him if he hated me for fathering him. He said no. All was well, he told me, as long as he still had his life.”

“You seriously underestimated him,” Ashina Adarvan pointed out.

“Out of all the jiao I’ve known, he resembled a dragon most,” Ye Ming said. “He could sense the jiao’s agitation and agony, as well as the dragons’ uneasiness. When he was still a hatchling, he was always asking ‘Why?’ Even after I cast him down into the abyss for almost a millennium, he emerged practically unchanged.”

Both Ashina Adarvan and Li Jinglong shuddered.

“You were fooled,” Li Jinglong said.

“I was,” Ye Ming agreed. “After being imprisoned in the darkness for a thousand years, he was eager for revenge, seething with anger, hatred, and agony. But I didn’t see it. I believed he regretted his actions—and I continued to believe it up until the moment he killed me. During his long imprisonment, he’d absorbed so much resentment and anguish from the exiled jiao who died after countless years of suffering in the abyss. These emotions are what you mortals call ‘demons.’”

Chapter 133:
Deceitful Schemes

"AND THEN YE MING DIED," the dragon king finished solemnly. "Xie Yu destroyed the barriers between the levels of the tower and polluted the seven dragon kings with the demonic energy he'd dragged up with him from the abyss."

Feeling the dragon king falter slightly beneath him, Hongjun asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," the dragon king said. "The abyss lies ahead."

They'd soared past the ice-capped peak where Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi had first landed and now hovered over a massive chasm in the ground that led to the abyss. Unable to resist, Hongjun peered down and almost slipped from the dragon's back.

"Careful!" the dragon king warned. Qiu Yongsi lunged to grab Hongjun.

Still, Hongjun had seen enough to catch a faint flicker of light in the chasm's depths, a fleeting glimmer that reminded him of fireflies dancing in the forests on a dark night. "What was that?"

"Did you see something?" Qiu Yongsi asked.

Puzzled, the dragon king lowered his head to look, only for both exorcists to scream shrilly, "Don't!"

Qiu Yongsi was clinging to one of the dragon king's horns; he would be sent flying with the slightest shake of the dragon's head.

The dragon king straightened his neck, and they flew on a while longer, until the dragon king announced, "We're here."

The pillar of light that had been a thin column from a distance now took up a wide swath of the sky. Hongjun gazed down toward its base, where a massive array glowed in the center of the snowy plain below them. It looked surprisingly familiar. "Huh?"

“You recognize it?” Qiu Yongsi asked with a smile. “I learned about this transportation array when I was living on the ninth level. It’s the same one we used to hide the Department of Exorcism.”

No wonder! Hongjun thought. He suddenly recalled that the transportation array the nine-tailed celestial fox had drawn looked like this as well. “Xie Yu used this too… Wait—how were you so calm back then when you saw it?! You didn’t even say anything!”

“I guessed Wu Qiyu learned the transportation technique from Xie Yu,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “I told the chief my suspicions; that’s how he inferred Xie Yu was still in Chang’an.”

“Hold on tight!” the dragon king roared. “We’re going up to the third level!”

Picking up speed, he dove into the pillar of light, and they shot up into the skies. Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi each clung to a horn for dear life, screaming the entire way.

“We need to keep moving,” Li Jinglong said to Ye Ming. “We have to return to the mortal world as soon as possible.”

“More than half a month has already passed in the mortal world since you entered the tower,” Ye Ming told him.

Li Jinglong hadn’t slept since they’d arrived in Hang Prefecture the day before. He looked exhausted.

“We should take a break,” Ashina Adarvan suggested.

Li Jinglong scrubbed a hand over his face. “I can keep going. Let’s find Hongjun first.”

“I’ll send you down to the eighth level,” Ye Ming said. “From there, descend the tower level by level through the portals Xie Yu opened. When you find Yongsi, he can bring you back up here.”

Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan made their way down to the transportation array on the ground floor of the pagoda. As they stepped into the middle of the array, Ye Ming’s voice echoed from above. “I can hold on for three more days. If you don’t return before then—”

“What?!” both exorcists shouted in dismay as the array flared with light, transporting them away.

Autumn arrived in the thirteenth year of Tianbao. The weather in Chang’an had cooled pleasantly after several spells of autumn rain. The moon shone brightly in the night sky, bathing the sleeping metropolis in its soft glow.

Noble Consort Yang, fresh from her bath, gazed forlornly out at the courtyard in Xingqing Palace. The news of Yang Guozhong’s mysterious disappearance after her birthday celebration had spread like wildfire. She’d specially paid a visit to the Department of Exorcism before Li Jinglong’s departure hoping for answers, but the ones she received had shocked her: According to him, her cousin had died long ago, and a yaoguai had taken his place—the same thing that had happened to her eldest sister, the Duchess of Guo.

Li Jinglong had promised not to breathe a word of this while he worked with the crown prince to administer a fitting punishment to the yaoguai impersonating her cousin—which could be nothing but a death sentence, but at least it might be a dignified one.

Yang Yuhuan had no idea whether it was fate or purely coincidence that two of her family members had been replaced by yaoguai. Although Li Jinglong had repeatedly assured her that the rest of her family was safe, the revelation had led her to regard her two remaining sisters—the Duchesses of Han and Qin—with fear and suspicion.

As time went on, she’d started to see the dark silhouette of the Duchess of Guo in the wee hours each night and woke scared out of her wits by the shadow looming over her bed. These frightening visits, night after night, tortured Yang Yuhuan almost to the point of insanity. Li Longji never brought up her cousin in front of her, so she had no choice but to dry her tears and paste on a smile.

What misfortune was this? Why did it seem like a curse had befallen the Yang family? Nor was she the only one drowning in agony; her family also suffered.

Many years ago, her father Yang Xuanyan—once a revenue manager stationed in Central Shu—had been sentenced to prison. When he'd fallen desperately ill behind bars, he'd summoned his children and exhorted them to support one another. *This will not be how the Yang family meets its end,* he'd said then.

She'd been no more than ten years old when her cousin had grasped her hand in his and promised her father he'd properly care for their family.

Was Yang Guozhong already a yaoguai then? She had no idea. Even Li Jinglong couldn't tell her. Her only wish now was to meet her cousin once more before his execution—regardless of whether he was yao or human, she wanted answers.

Sometimes she found herself on the brink of shattering, overcome by the urge to throw a fit and demand answers from Li Longji, even if she'd pay the steep price of losing her life. But then she would remember her family, which had more than seventy members. Li Longji's mood had become unpredictable as he aged; if she was thrown into prison, every one of her relatives who relied on her support would suffer for her rash actions.

Unable to even indulge in a good, proper cry, Yang Yuhuan lived out her days in despair.

As she sat quietly under the moonlight, letting the autumnal breeze wash past, a heavy silence suddenly descended over her. The menacing aura of blood and strife seemed to press her down; it felt as though death flashed before her eyes. Yet her first thought was simply: *Perhaps I'll be free from my troubles when I die*.

Yang Yuhuan watched numbly as a black mist surged toward her through the courtyard. All her dreams began like this: The mist would soon coalesce into her elder sister, who would tell her in a soft and insistent voice to avenge her death…

"You're back?" Yang Yuhuan murmured.

"Yes," said the black mist as it gathered into the shape of Yang Guozhong. In his tattered clothes, he was the very image of a lone ghost wandering the land as he limped toward Yang Yuhuan from the garden.

Stunned, Yang Yuhuan staggered forward to meet him, her voice breaking. "Ge—"

“My lady?” a maid called.

Yang Guozhong stumbled and fell into Yang Yuhuan’s arms. As if waking from a trance, she caught him and helped him kneel on the ground before turning back. “Don’t come out here,” she said calmly. “I just had a nightmare; I need some time to compose myself.”

The maid withdrew. Yang Yuhuan knelt down beside Yang Guozhong, taking in the filth covering his face and the rotten leaves and branches stuck to his clothes.

Lying limp in Yang Yuhuan’s arms, he raised a shaking hand. “I… don’t have much longer…”

Yang Yuhuan heaved for breath as Yang Guozhong’s hand grasped hers tightly. “I… I need to see…His Majesty.”

Yang Yuhuan glanced around furtively, then met Yang Guozhong’s gaze. Her warm tears fell on his face, and he raised his hand to wipe them away. “Even though I’m on my last breath, I came back to meet His Majesty, because I…have something…to say…”

Distraught, Yang Yuhuan cried, “No… No, you must leave! Leave at once! Go!”

Despite the lateness of the hour, the servants in the palace outside Yang Yuhuan’s bedroom were plunged into disorder at the sight of the black mist’s descent. Eunuchs holding torches formed a human barricade around the noble consort’s residence as Li Longji strode briskly over, with Li Guinian only a few steps behind.

Distracted, Li Longji pointed to a spot outside the hall and motioned for Li Guinian to wait.

“The Marquis of Yardang said…” Li Guinian began.

“We are the emperor, the most powerful man in this nation. What have we to fear from a mere yaoguai?” replied Li Longji.

Li Guinian had no choice but to obediently step aside as Li Longji marched into the hall.

Yang Yuhuan sat in front of the bed, keeping vigil over Yang Guozhong, whose outer robes were so shredded as to be unrecognizable. Li

Longji stopped and watched in silence as Yang Yuhuan sobbed over him, all her composure abandoned.

"So you've come, mortal emperor," Yang Guozhong murmured. His eyes remained shut.

Li Longji drew in a deep breath. Looking at this familiar face, he couldn't find it in himself to rage or scold. For a moment, he felt like the man lying on the bed was the same Yang Guozhong he once knew.

"So this is what you've always been after—you seek to rule the nation of Great Tang," Li Longji said.

"But you need me, don't you?" Yang Guozhong said weakly. "To be frank, I used to pity you. But in the nation's historical records, passed down for generations, I alone will be scorned, never you… As though anyone who ascends the mortal throne has ever done so with a pure heart and a clear conscience! Benevolent rulers they may be, but at the same time, are they not also…" He lapsed into a brief silence. "Forget it."

Sovereign and subject understood each other without the need for words.

Throughout his tenure in the imperial court, Yang Guozhong had been the subject of endless scorn, yet everything he'd done had been for the sake of aiding Li Longji. If the Right Chancellor hadn't extorted so much money with his extreme policies, the nation of Great Tang would never have amassed such wealth. Since antiquity, there had been no shortage of treacherous officials under mediocre rulers. While more and more objections were raised against the Yang family each day, Yang Guozhong was the only man who understood that Li Longji, too, was merely human, and thus naturally harbored passions and desires, avarice and obsession, like any other mortal.

Yang Guozhong had become the shadow to Li Longji's light. That was all there was to it.

"You're the black dragon I saw in the Jing River," Li Longji said grimly.

"Yes…that was me," Yang Guozhong said wearily. "I'll be taking my leave very soon. This body… I'll return it to you, and we shall never meet again, in life or in death. It's true that I wanted to seize the throne and rule

this prosperous nation, but…I did see you as a friend. Farewell, mortal emperor of Great Tang.”

Black mist billowed out from his body. Yang Yuhuan gasped in shock, but before she could start forward, Li Longji grasped her wrist.

“It is not I who will bring about the impending calamity,” Yang Guozhong said, his last words. “It is…An Lushan.”

Yang Guozhong’s arm fell limp over the edge of the bed, and the sound of a dragon’s roar whipped past them like a whirlwind. As if something invisible had broken apart in front of them, the cloud of black mist exploded outward and slowly rose into the skies.

Despite his orders, Li Guinian burst in, the ring on his finger flaring crimson as the sacred flame formed a ring around them, shielding the emperor and his consort.

Every last tendril of the dark mist dispersed, revealing Yang Guozhong’s tattered form as he lay on the bed. The autumn breeze blew in, rustling the gauze curtains in the hall.

Li Longji watched this unfold in stunned silence. When moonlight once again filtered into the hall, illuminating Yang Guozhong’s face, Li Guinian slowly stepped forward to press his fingers to Yang Guozhong’s wrist.

After an endless minute, his pulse—weakly, faintly—started beating again.

Not far away, in the depths of Daming Palace, the black jiao twisted, engulfed in flames. In the obsidian mist surrounding him, manifestations of myriad yao—Wu Qiyu and Fei’ao among them—appeared.

“That was far too risky,” Wu Qiyu snapped. “What if they kill the vessel?”

“They won’t,” Xie Yu replied, voice low. “Li Jinglong isn’t in Chang’an—I tricked him into the Dragon-Quelling Tower. When the body I left behind wakes up, he’ll be a mortal through and through; I doubt Li Longji will have the heart to kill him.”

“But you can never return to that body again,” Wu Qiyu said. “The soul-fusing technique is exceptionally difficult to perform. If it wasn’t so, could Kong Xuan have succeeded in sealing Yu Zaoyun so many years ago?”

“We’ll wait,” Xie Yu said, his voice firm. “What I need now is demonic energy.”

“How long?” Wu Qiyu asked.

“Until An Lushan strikes,” Xie Yu answered. “As long as the heart lamp remains absent from the mortal world, I will emerge triumphant in the end.”

In a flash of light, the dragon king arrived on the third level with Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun on his back. Almost instantly, Hongjun was assaulted by a wave of scorching heat.

“This is the Prison of True Fire,” said the dragon king. Cold mist curled from his scales and dissipated into the hot air. “The land of flame jiao and the Dragon King of Fire.”

Jagged peaks of volcanoes obscured the horizon, and orange lava stirred beneath their feet.

“These crazy temperature swings will make us sick,” Hongjun said, still perched on one of the dragon king’s horns.

“There’s nothing I can do about it,” the dragon king said. “Another dragon king guards this level. Xie Yu has also polluted him with demonic energy; we should avoid him if we can.”

“What’s his name?” Hongjun asked.

“I don’t remember,” the dragon king replied.

“So you’ve forgotten your own name, as well as those of the other dragons,” Hongjun observed.

“Before the seven dragon kings set foot in this tower, we made a promise to forget our names.”

“Why?”

“In casting our names aside, we gave up our noble status as dragon kings, as well as everything we had to our names. This was the deal we made with the ancient immortals after losing the war against them.”

“But…” Hongjun fell silent—something itched at the back of his mind.

“Names hold special meaning to dragons,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “Before they become dragons, all jiao are nameless.”

“Not Xie Yu, though,” Hongjun said.

“That is the name Ye Ming gave him,” said the dragon king.

“I think…” A memory had surfaced in Hongjun’s mind—something he’d read about primordial dragons. They’d all had names, clearly written down in black and white. “Your name…is it Xuan…?”

Qiu Yongsi watched in silence as Hongjun racked his brain.

“I got it! Your name is Xuan Ming!” Hongjun chirped. “Gosh, I have such a bad memory!”

The dragon king froze in midair and let out an earthshaking roar. Ice crystals exploded from his body as a blizzard tore through their fiery surroundings in a flurry of ice and snow. “*I remember!*” the dragon king bellowed.

Both Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi were rendered speechless as the dragon king climbed higher into the sky, unleashing another thunderous roar—this time, one of euphoria. Although blood still seeped through the cloak around his throat, something in him seemed to have changed.

“Xuan Ming, calm down!” Qiu Yongsi yelled. “Calm down!”

They screamed as Xuan Ming plunged into a steep dive toward the lava. When the bubbling surface was practically right in front of them, Xuan Ming breathed a gust of chilly air, freezing the area around them and turning the boiling lava into a hundred square feet of solid ground.

“Aiya!” Hongjun tumbled headfirst onto the rock as Xuan Ming shifted into human form. He shook out indigo robes, his silver hair dancing in the wind—he’d become an aloof, handsome young man.

Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi stared at him, gobsmacked.

“I never thought this day would come,” Xuan Ming murmured. “To think I would finally remember my name when my time is almost up… Thank you.”

Qiu Yongsi turned to Hongjun. “What did you do?!”

“How should I know?!” Hongjun sputtered.

He had given Li Jinglong a book, he recalled, in which several dragons’ names—which originated in primordial times and had long since disappeared from much of history—were recorded. Despite its contents, the book didn’t appear that rare or special.

Even in his human form, the gaping wound on Xuan Ming’s chest oozed black blood. He opened his mouth, but whatever he wished to say next was swallowed up by a roar from the sea of lava. A giant dragon engulfed in flames rose from its bubbling surface and swooped toward them.

“The dragon king guarding this level!” Qiu Yongsi exclaimed.

Xuan Ming raised a hand, summoning a blizzard that swept toward the fire dragon. The dragon retaliated soundlessly, drawing the lava up into balls of flaming rock that rained down on the boiling sea beneath them like meteors.

“His eyes!” Qiu Yongsi shouted.

The fire dragon’s eyes, like Xuan Ming’s heart, were polluted with demonic energy. The dragon thrashed, seemingly in agony, as he plunged back into the lava, stirring the sea of molten rock into a raging ocean.

“I’ll take you to him!” Xuan Ming called, shifting back into his draconic form. The moment Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun leapt onto his head, he streaked toward the fire dragon, whose scales blazed the bright orange-red of raging flames. As they closed in on their target, still raining balls of lava down on them, Qiu Yongsi yelled, “There’s no way—it’s too hot! We’ll be burnt to a crisp!”

“I can’t catch him!” Xuan Ming shouted back. “He’s moving too fast!”

Diving into the lava and seizing the fire dragon as it writhed through the churning sea was an impossible feat, even for Xuan Ming, whose body

emanated gusts of frigid air.

“Lure him out of the lava—just once more!” Qiu Yongsi told him.

Xuan Ming took a deep breath and blasted shards of ice at the lava. Provoked, the fire dragon broke through the surface to bombard Xuan Ming with his fiery breath.

Qiu Yongsi waved his brush. “Go!”

Abruptly, their surroundings turned into ink. The fire raining down on them clustered into one spot on the painting. Flattened into a smudge of ink resembling a shadow puppet, the fire dragon reeled back, unable to dodge his enemies. In that instant, Xuan Ming surged forward, closing the distance between them.

Qiu Yongsi shouted, once again, “Open!”

Twisting in midair, Xuan Ming closed his teeth around the fire dragon’s throat and slammed him into a volcano studded with obsidian rocks.

“Hongjun!” Qiu Yongsi called.

Hongjun was flung toward the dragon, his saber spinning in his hand. With a somersault, he swept the blade out in a clean slash, excising the demonic parasites from his eyes with a single strike.

The parasites hissed and spat as Qiu Yongsi trapped them in a painting. The fire dragon yowled in agony. He and Xuan Ming collapsed atop the volcano’s dark stone.

Xuan Ming shifted back into his human form, clutching his chest in agony. He stumbled and nearly fell to his knees. Before Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi could speed over, he waved a hand and motioned for them to check on the fire dragon. Black blood flowed from the Dragon King of Flame’s eyes, flashing into steam the moment it splashed over the hot stone.

Both Hongjun’s and Qiu Yongsi’s hair was frizzled from the searing heat of the volcano. They watched the fire dragon lying immobile on the ground warily as they approached him.

“Do you know his name?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

“I think it’s…” Hongjun thought for a moment, unsure. “Ying Huo?”

Chapter 134:
An Arduous Journey

SEVERAL FLOORS ABOVE, on the eighth level, Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan were running for their lives. Sprinting across barren hills, they darted between lightning strikes as booming claps of thunder erupted in their ears.

"I'm about to go deaf!"

"What did you say?!"

They each tried to read the other's lips, an endeavor made considerably more difficult by the bolts of lightning shooting everywhere. A green jiao crackling with electricity plunged toward them, hissing.

Ashina Adarvan launched himself into a flip. A blinding glow and raging flames enveloped him as he summoned the war god Verethragna and rose higher into the sky.

Li Jinglong was shocked speechless.

Behind Ashina Adarvan, the manifestation of Verethragna flung his arms wide, unleashing twin whips licking with flames, which wrapped themselves around the green jiao. The creature thrashed within its confines, but the whips refused to give way, winding more tightly around where its heart would be—its weakest spot.

"Gotcha!" Ashina Adarvan cried.

The jiao crashed toward the ground. Li Jinglong leapt up and grabbed its lone horn. As if taming a horse, Ashina Adarvan yanked back on the flaming whips. "Giddy up!"

He steered the jiao up into the sky, forcing it to weave through the bolts of lightning and toward the towering pillar of light in the distance.

"Who's the Dragon-Vanquishing Immortal now!" Ashina Adarvan crowed. "Might as well give that title to me!"

“I don’t mind,” Li Jinglong called back, “but you’ll have to ask Lao-Qiu!”

Mustering all his energy, Li Jinglong clambered onto the green jiao’s back. A gargantuan dragon, sizzling with electrical current, had appeared in the distance, rushing toward them with a threatening roar.

“Hold on tight!” Ashina Adarvan hollered.

Twin horns enveloped in dark mist, the giant dragon unleashed countless streaks of lightning that arced through the sky and blasted the valley below.

The eighth level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower was small in area; only a few green jiao and the Dragon King of Lightning soared through the skies here. As the dragon king rapidly closed the distance between them, Ashina Adarvan snapped his whips and turned the jiao back toward their pursuer, shooting past the dragon king in the opposite direction. In the moment they brushed past, Li Jinglong caught sight of something nestled within the mist wreathing the dragon king’s horns—two hissing demons.

Li Jinglong yelped as the jiao swerved and he was almost flung to the ground. Ashina Adarvan jerked the whips, urging the jiao upward just as the dragon king turned toward them once again.

“Fly straight toward the dragon!” Li Jinglong called. “Don’t dodge!”

Speechless, Ashina Adarvan obeyed.

Releasing his hold on the jiao’s back, Li Jinglong sprinted up the creature’s spine. He set a foot on Ashina Adarvan’s shoulder and launched himself into the air, coming to land on the jiao’s head. Together, they steered their mount directly toward the Dragon King of Lightning.

Electricity sizzled around the dragon’s horns in flashes of blue and purple as the creature gathered up the bolts forking across the sky, plunging their surroundings into ominous silence. The ball of lightning flickering between the dragon’s horns turned a malevolent orange-red as it swelled, ready to strike the dragon’s foes. If those deadly beams were unleashed, the exorcists were sure to be incinerated into ashes scattering in the wind.

“Shit!” Ashina Adarvan yelped. “I haven’t even found myself a handsome young lover yet! Chief! I don’t wanna die!”

With a shout, Li Jinglong spun the hilt of his sword, and a blinding beam of light shot toward the dragon king with a low thrum. Startled, the dragon dodged, letting out an enraged snarl as its ball of lightning went astray.

The green jiao grazed past the dragon king as it whipped through the air. A bolt of lightning struck just behind it, obliterating mountains and throwing chunks of crushed rock into the air. Electricity arced between the debris as it fell. Trapped in that sea of deadly flashes, Li Jinglong's voice was completely drowned out; no one heard his cries as he plunged to the ground.

Shifting the whips to one hand as the green jiao bucked beneath him, Ashina Adarvan spared a moment to pull Li Jinglong up before steering the jiao into the pillar of light shooting into the sky. With a loud boom, the two exorcists, the green jiao they were riding, and the stones raining down around them were sent to the seventh level.

A length of black cloth obscured the Dragon King of Flame's damaged eyes in human form. Clad in red robes, he raised a hand toward the boundless sea of lava, and a path of obsidian stone rose from its depths. Qiu Yongsi stepped onto it first, followed by Xuan Ming, then Hongjun.

"I feel like I had a long, long nightmare," Ying Huo said. "I awoke remembering the name I once bore."

Hongjun glanced at Ying Huo again and again as they walked. His flame-red combat robes reminded him of Chong Ming, and his eyes, from which blood still seeped even with the cloth, resembled Yuan Kun's. Hongjun's chest twinged with sadness; he'd been away from home too long. He wondered how Chong Ming was faring up in the Taihang Mountains.

While hearing about Ye Ming's past, he'd been reminded again and again of his adoptive father guarding Yaojin Palace. Guilt rose in his heart for abandoning Chong Ming when he'd left with Li Jinglong.

Ying Huo seemed to sense Hongjun watching him. "I'm fine."

These were the words he'd heard the dragon kings say most often. First Xuan Ming, and now Ying Huo too.

“Why do you keep looking at him?” Xuan Ming asked as they strode across the obsidian bridge toward the transportation portal. Lava roiled on either side of their passageway.

“I was thinking of my dad,” Hongjun said.

“Does he look like me?” Ying Huo asked impassively.

Ying Huo’s fiery aura *did* somewhat resemble Chong Ming’s—a scorching energy that could set anyone too close to them aflame.

“Mm.” Hongjun looked up at the pillar of light.

“You were brought up by the phoenix, weren’t you?” Ying Huo asked suddenly. Perhaps like called to like—he could sense the phoenix feather Hongjun carried on him.

Noticing Hongjun seemed to be feeling homesick, Qiu Yongsi patted his shoulder in reassurance. In this lonely, ancient tower, cut off from the mortal world and without Li Jinglong by his side, of course Hongjun would feel anxious.

“I miss him,” Hongjun said.

“Only the phoenix can truly be said to live for eternity,” Ying Huo remarked. “He cannot die—he achieves nirvana in the burning flames. When you think about it, having a finite lifespan isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Try to spend more time with your father if you can; don’t end up like Xie Yu and Ye Ming.”

Ying Huo didn’t know much about Hongjun and Chong Ming’s relationship, so he left it at that. Hongjun nodded and followed the dragon king into the pillar of light.

Almost four months had passed outside the tower since Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan had entered it in the summer of the thirteenth year of Tianbao. Winter had arrived, and a thin layer of frost glazed the grass along the official road as a horse galloped into Pengze District at dawn, completing its long journey from Jiangnan.

Astride the horse sat a man and a woman, both with sable cloaks pulled tight around their shoulders. The man was as pretty as a young maiden, with fair skin, a head of dark brown curls, and eyes like jewels

submerged in water. What little skin was exposed at the woman's neck and wrists was a healthy bronze, and her long, thick eyelashes fanned over eyes like autumn pools. She wore a cool, aloof expression as she glanced around them.

They were, of course, none other than A-Tai and Turandokht.

The first thing A-Tai did upon their arrival in Pengze was collect their letters from the relay station. As expected, he found a missive from Li Guinian.

"What's this?" Turandokht frowned when she saw who the letter was from. "What is your dashixiong doing? How did that big snake end up back in Chang'an?"

"Shh." A-Tai paid some silver to collect another letter from Cloud Villa in Hang Prefecture, this one stamped with Qiu Qiu's personal seal. The paper he unfurled was blank—the signal that everything remained the same on Qiu Qiu's end. There was as yet no sign of Li Jinglong leaving the tower.

Li Jinglong had assigned tasks to all of them before entering the tower, reiterating that no one needed to wait for him at Cloud Villa. Instead, he'd ordered them to split up and search for any clues that would lead them to the remaining five artifacts of Acalanatha. During their journey to Jiangnan, Li Jinglong had laid out the department's main objectives for the next year: First, to locate the remaining five artifacts, and second, to infiltrate Fanyang to keep an eye on An Lushan. Hence Mergen and Lu Xu struck out for You Prefecture, where An Lushan was military governor, while A-Tai and Turandokht went to Pengze. Both were places where Di Renjie had once served as a government official. Li Jinglong suspected that Di Renjie had found the Sword of Wisdom in one of these two locations.

Just a few months ago, everyone had assumed Xie Yu would soon be locked in the Dragon-Quelling Tower again. His escape through the transportation array just as the exorcists were preparing to leave Cloud Villa had upended all their plans. Now it was Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan who were trapped inside the tower, while Xie Yu roamed free outside—they'd all fallen for the black jiao's ploy.

Though they'd been tricked, what was done was done. After a brief discussion, Mergen ordered them to stick to the plan. After all, Xie Yu

didn’t know that Li Jinglong had stationed Li Guinian in Chang’an as backup. If Xie Yu rashly returned to the capital, he would run right into their trap. As for An Lushan, his current status was a mystery. Thus, rather than pursue Xie Yu, their top priority was to obtain information about his movements while in You Prefecture.

With these goals in mind, the remaining four split into two teams and went their separate ways. A-Tai and Turandokht’s sphere of investigation was the Jiangxi Circuit, which included the county of Pengze; they would seek out information about Di Renjie’s past adventures there.

Three months ago, Li Guinian had sent his first letter informing them that Yang Guozhong had returned to the imperial court. Not only had Li Longji disregarded Li Jinglong’s advice to let Li Guinian deal with him, he’d even allowed Yang Guozhong to recuperate in Xingqing Palace.

“It’s not that simple,” A-Tai said to Turandokht. “Either Xie Yu has died, or he’s regained the emperor’s trust through some elaborate ploy.”

Turandokht squinted at the letter. “I can’t read this Han script; read it to me.”

A-Tai shrugged. “Dashixiong says he’ll continue to observe the situation and tells us not to hurry back. That’s all he wrote.”

After returning to Xingqing Palace, Yang Guozhong had been spared thanks to the efforts of Noble Consort Yang, who had begged the emperor to let him live. Despite using every device and technique in his arsenal, Li Guinian had failed to detect any lingering yao energy on him. Yang Guozhong, for his part, appeared to have forgotten many things. He spent his days resting in Xingqing Palace and had yet to attend court.

Xie Yu had played a risky hand by making his presence known instead of remaining in the shadows. However, now that Li Jinglong was trapped indefinitely, the Department of Exorcism had no way to deal with him.

“We’ll think of something when the chief is out of that tower,” said A-Tai at last. “I agree—it’s hard to believe Xie Yu would abandon his mortal body so easily. But that’s for later. We’re heading to the capital of Jiang Prefecture today.”

“Do you really think we’ll find anything?” After months of looking, Turandokht was beginning to tire. During their travels northward from Hang Prefecture, they’d asked everywhere about Di Renjie. But it’d been sixty years since he’d worked in Pengze County—how many people would remember anything that had happened so long ago?

“We have to try.” A-Tai whistled for their horse, shrugging helplessly. “What else can we do? Let’s go.”

Turandokht stared at A-Tai. “You’ve matured quite a lot since you started working for that Han fellow.”

“Was I really *that* immature?” A-Tai mounted his horse before pulling Turandokht up behind him.

“You used to run away at the first sign of trouble,” she said. “But you’re not doing that now—why?”

“In the words of the Han people, I’m ‘concealing my brilliance while training in darkness,’” A-Tai said with a chuckle. “We’ll get rich, *and* we’ll restore our homeland. Trust me.”

He snapped the reins, and the horse galloped off toward the capital of Jiang Prefecture.

“I don’t know why, but I feel like we’re close to finding something,” A-Tai said.

“You said that two months ago,” replied Turandokht.

“I’m dead sure this time!”

Outside a relay station in You Prefecture, the winds raged, blowing a flurry of snow into their faces. Mergen tethered their horse, and the two went in to look for any news A-Tai might have sent from Jiang Prefecture.

Lu Xu scanned the pile of letters at the counter and picked up one with the words *Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism* on it. He slapped it down in front of Mergen. “Here’s one.”

“Any word from Chang’an?” Mergen asked as he rummaged through the mountain of letters. Since the beginning of winter, numerous letters had poured into You Prefecture from the south and the Central Plains. However,

as governor of the region, An Lushan had established an independent communication network. These dispatches were thus ignored, since none of An Lushan's people cared about documents arriving from or delivered to Chang'an and Luoyang.

The pile of unread letters grew bigger and bigger until the end of the season, when they would be poured into baskets and burned. In the dead of winter, the men working at the yamen would even haul letters from the Great Tang Salt and Iron Bureau away to be used as kindling. Every time Mergen came to riffle through the letters, he felt like a dog rummaging through scraps.

"No," said Lu Xu. "No word from Chang'an." He peered over Mergen's shoulder at A-Tai's letter. "For once, you were right."

"Huh?" Mergen knit his brows in confusion. "Since when can you read?"

"I learned ages ago," Lu Xu said waspishly.

Mergen laughed. He reached a hand out to stroke Lu Xu's cheek, and Lu Xu recoiled, regarding him warily.

"You think this is funny?" Lu Xu asked. "What do we do now? We still have no idea when Hongjun will get out of there."

"We should believe in them," Mergen said. "Let's just focus on our own tasks."

He tucked the letter away and stepped outside to bring their horses around. Instead of mounting, he held their leads and walked slowly through the snowy hustle and bustle of You Prefecture with Lu Xu. They'd arrive at Fanyang the next day.

Compared to A-Tai and Turandokht's mission, theirs was much more difficult. This was the enemy's home base, after all; they couldn't investigate openly. Their first priority would be to conceal their identities.

"I don't think we're going to find any of the stuff you guys were talking about here," Lu Xu said, unrolling a parchment scroll.

They'd arrived in You Prefecture four months ago. First, they'd traveled about sixty miles north of Fanyang, entering Khitan territory in search of clues. The endless stretch of mountains was an ideal place for the

wolf and deer to run, but they found no sign of any ancient ruins there. They had, however, come across a large number of cemeteries looted by grave robbers.

Lu Xu had suggested they trek further northward and try their luck in the Great Xianbei Mountains. Back when Di Renjie had served as the commandant of You Prefecture, merchants from all corners of the land had gathered there. Perhaps some Xianbei people had brought treasures they'd found in the north to You Prefecture, where Di Renjie had encountered them.

But Mergen had insisted on returning to the city first. They'd spend months in the mountains if they were to set foot in them; they couldn't depart until they got word from their companions in the south and Chang'an.

It was then that they had received the worst possible news.

As the saying went, the most dangerous place was often the safest. After returning to Chang'an, Yang Guozhong had become the target of public scorn, but at the same time, he was allowed to recuperate in the palace under the protection of the emperor. Without Li Jinglong's leadership, the remaining members of the Department of Exorcism didn't know how to deal with the Son of Heaven. If the exorcists made the rash decision to return to Chang'an and challenge Xie Yu, then Yang Yuhuan, in her eagerness to protect her cousin, might bring Li Longji's wrath down on them.

Mergen offered his analysis as they walked. "Li Guinian said he detected no yao energy. Yang Guozhong likely won't cause any trouble—at least for now."

"I can't believe Xie Yu would just give up his mortal body," Lu Xu said.

"True. But as long as Yang Guozhong remains only Yang Guozhong, he won't gather any more yao in Chang'an."

"What do you think Xie Yu's waiting for?"

Mergen had no answer. They crested a hill and gazed out toward the black clouds enveloping Fanyang, the capital of You Prefecture, not far

away. Thick smoke rose from the iron foundries toiling day and night—it was clear what An Lushan was up to.

“Let’s go into the city and take a look,” Mergen suggested.

Since leaving Hang Prefecture, Lu Xu always deferred to Mergen’s decisions, just as Hongjun did when he was with Li Jinglong. But unlike Hongjun, who raised no objections because he was oblivious to what was happening, Lu Xu simply didn’t care. Yet now, all of a sudden, he held up a hand. “Big Wolf. Wait. I don’t want to go down there.”

Mergen turned sharply to look at him. Lu Xu continued, “It’s dangerous in the city; I can feel it. We shouldn’t go in.”

“The city is bursting with yao energy,” Mergen agreed. “You stay here, then. I’ll be back in no time.”

“You—!” Lu Xu was instantly furious. He was only being tactful because he didn’t want Mergen to walk into danger, but what did Mergen take him for? A damsel in distress? “Like hell I’ll stay!” he snapped, a scowl twisting his brows.

“Then come along and keep an eye on me.” Mergen grinned and swung astride his horse. Gripping his whip, he spurred the horse down the hill and into the city.

Chapter 135:
A Flash of Inspiration

THE YAO ENERGY in Fanyang was so intense Mergen and Lu Xu didn't need to hunt down its source—they felt it the moment they walked through the gates. Only half of the city's residents were human; all the rest were yao. What humans they saw were all soldiers, clad in armor and wearing blades at their hips as they patrolled streets full of yao civilians.

The malign energy in this city was palpable; there was so much of it that it rose beyond the clouds. The original residents had all been consumed and replaced by yao—snakes, pigs, foxes, tigers, and more creatures Mergen and Lu Xu couldn't identify. They loitered in the streets, engaging in public fistfights or simply glaring menacingly at passersby.

This city loomed above the plains like a monster with gaping jaws, swallowing everyone into its bloody maw. Merchants and travelers entering became ready food for the yao walking its streets.

Instead of entering through the main gate, Mergen and Lu Xu vaulted over the walls and slunk through the alleyways into a more secluded area of the city.

"There's too many of them," Lu Xu said. "We need to inform—"

"Inform who?" Mergen scanned their surroundings as he and Lu Xu turned down another alley. Whatever they had expected to find in the city, it wasn't this.

Mergen's question brought Lu Xu up short. Indeed, who could they tell? The Department of Exorcism? Li Jinglong? There were only seven exorcists in the Divine Land, and four of them were in the Dragon-Quelling Tower in Hang Prefecture, trapped until who knew when.

A woman spotted them and began to make her way over. Mergen promptly altered his features: Thick fur grew on both sides of his face, and his pupils elongated into slits as his irises changed into a wolfish blue-gray. Lengthened canines completed his transformation. He took a step forward, shielding Lu Xu behind him, and growled.

“Huh.” The woman looked him up and down. “A wolf? I haven’t seen you around before. You new here?”

Studying her warily, Mergen offered a furry paw to Lu Xu, who took it in his own. They backed away down the alley, watching her warily.

The woman raised a fingerless hand; her arm was hairy, like a spider’s. Pointing northward, she said, “If you’re new, you need to register at the governor’s office.”

Mergen dragged Lu Xu out of the alley in silence.

Yao thronged the streets. They might have passed for ordinary humans if not for their long tails and furry ears—most of them hadn’t even bothered to disguise themselves. To think such a city existed in the mortal world, full of yao brazenly walking around in the open. Even in his wildest dreams, Lu Xu had never imagined a sight so bizarre.

“They all seem to know each other,” Lu Xu whispered to Mergen.

Mergen leaned closer. “Foxes have sharp ears,” he murmured. “Watch your mouth.”

Lu Xu pressed his lips shut. He walked beside Mergen down the long street toward the general’s estate, mind whirling. How would they get out of here? The gray wolf and white deer were both fleet-footed; so long as they weren’t completely surrounded, they shouldn’t have a problem. Lu Xu could fly; if worse came to worst, he could always carry Mergen on his back and soar into the sky.

The most troublesome part was that Lu Xu had no idea what Mergen hoped to learn before they could leave, or how long it would take. If their enemy had powerful yao on their side, they could be facing a difficult fight.

There was a long line outside the governor’s office when they arrived. Mergen gestured toward a nearby building, and he and Lu Xu ducked around the corner and peeked out.

“Name and place of origin? What brings you to You Prefecture?” the carp yao asked a weasel yao, brush in hand.

“From Changlin County. No name,” the weasel said. “I heard Lord Mara will lead us to prosperity.”

The yao’s family clustered behind him. A weasel woman held the hand of a child with a furry face and cradled a smelly newborn kit in her other arm. The kit blinked its eyes at the carp yao.

“From now on, your name is Wu Jiading!” the carp yao declared, dubbing the weasel *five-one-four*, which he jotted down with a flourish.[14] “Head to the barracks on the west side of the city. Someone will help the four of you settle in.”

After taking the token the carp yao handed him, the weasel yao bowed and left. Behind the weasel was a burly man with dark skin, built like a tower forged from iron. As he studied the carp yao, the fish felt a surge of terror, as though his natural enemy was staring him down—the man across from him was a bear yao!

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The bear yao's gaze passed over the carp, falling on the woman behind him—the carp yao's present master, the painted-skin yao. Danhuo held up a mirror, in the middle of drawing her brows. Sensing the bear yao's gaze, she glanced away from her reflection and leveled a dangerous look at the newcomer.

"A-Zhuang, from the Xianbei Mountains," the bear yao rumbled. "I heard there's plenty of food here in the heavenly demon's ranks."

When the bear yao had taken his token, another yao sidled up and leaned down to speak in Danhuo's ear. She slammed the mirror down on the table and rose. "I'm heading back to the estate."

"No, don't go!" the carp yao exclaimed, afraid a cat yao would show up next. A mere stare from such a creature would make him faint from fear.

"You're such a wuss," said Danhuo, already walking away. "I'll be back soon. Be a good fish and stay put."

The carp yao faced the crowd of yao with trepidation. *I'm going to become a dragon someday,* he thought, bracing himself. *As if I should fear any of you!*

Fortunately, he had no more natural enemies among the remaining yao who'd come to register. After tagging along with the Department of Exorcism for so long and watching Li Jinglong, the carp yao had learned how to conduct himself with authority. Although the position of his eyes meant he had to turn his fishy head when he haughtily scrutinized the other yao, which somewhat impacted his poise, he looked every bit the lofty official when he slammed his hands on the table and brandished his brush.

Only when the sun began to set did the line of yao entering the city dwindle. The carp yao tucked the registration book under his arm and hopped down from his chair. His hairy legs shivered in the chilly wind as he bounded back to the general's estate.

When he turned the corner of an alley, two fingers hooked roughly into his mouth and hoisted him up in the air.

The carp yao couldn't scream for help with his mouth full. He flailed his limbs, his world spinning.

Mergen’s voice rang coldly in his ear. “It’s been a while, Zhao Zilong.”

“What a surprise,” Lu Xu said expressionlessly.

The carp yao’s eyes went wide. He instantly went limp and peered beseechingly up at Mergen.

A cold spell rolled into both the Jiangdong and Jiangxi regions from the north. As night fell, Turandokht slumped over a desk in the dusty record room in Jiang Prefecture’s government office, bored out of her mind. A-Tai pulled scroll after scroll from the shelves, searching for any records Di Renjie might have left behind.

Forty years ago, all the record-keeping scrolls from Pengze District had been moved to this room, which no one ever visited. After showing the guard a letter from Li Jinglong—and pressing a bit of silver into his palm—A-Tai easily gained access to them.

“This makes no sense,” A-Tai muttered to himself. “We’ve searched everywhere in Pengze. We’ve done everything short of digging up the ground—but there’s nothing! Where did Di Renjie find that sword?”

Rolling a silver ring from her left hand to her right, then back again, Turandokht drawled, “Maybe you’ve all gotten it wrong?”

“I don’t think so,” A-Tai said. “Do you remember what we heard on the way here?”

Among the citizens of Pengze that A-Tai and Turandokht had interviewed, there were several octogenarians who had once worked in the district office. One man they’d talked to had even personally welcomed Di Renjie’s successor to the city. They all remembered that Di Renjie had worn a sword, but no one had any idea where it might have come from.

“I’m giving you three more days,” Turandokht threatened. Unable to read Han script, she had no way of helping A-Tai look through these scrolls.

“I told you to go back to the inn, but you refused,” A-Tai said with a frown.

Turandokht insisted on following A-Tai everywhere. Even when he knew she’d be bored, he couldn’t bear to say no to her, and so she often

ended up sitting around cooling her heels.

“That’s right, I’m not useful like your colleagues’ wives, Kong Hongjun or Lu Xu,” Turandokht said petulantly. “I’m not a man, so I can’t even fight alongside you.”

“What are you saying?” A-Tai was torn between laughter and tears. “I don’t like men.”

Turandokht huffed but said nothing. A-Tai tossed the scrolls he’d already checked into an empty urn and stretched his sore arms. “Why do you never just say what you mean? If you’re bored, go back and rest. Can’t you listen for once?”

His words seemed to have jabbed right at Turandokht’s sore spot. “Listen? To who? *You?*” she asked in rage. “I could’ve married another man long ago if I wanted to. You would never have had a chance!”

She reached for her whip.

A-Tai flinched. “Don’t! I misspoke, okay? Sorry! There’s no need for violence!”

Turandokht relented, but not before shooting him a sharp look. “Sing me a song.”

A-Tai felt he was about to go mad. He was so busy right now, but if he didn’t sing for Turandokht, he was guaranteed a whipping. He grabbed his barbat and obediently sat down across from her.

“What should I sing?” he asked, arranging his face into a serious expression.

“Whatever you want,” Turandokht said lazily, leaning against the desk. “Maybe ‘The Birds Fly Away, Then Return’?”

“Don’t you ever get sick of that song?” A-Tai asked with a smile.

Turandokht studied him with a scowl. “I like it. What’s wrong with that?”

A-Tai wisely said no more. He plucked the strings of his barbat and began to sing.

“The birds fly away and return, the tides ebb and then flow; the flowers blossom and wither; the plains green and then yellow.

“The stars are born and then die, promises once uttered turn hollow. Your eyes alone ripple blue like the lake. Oh! To be by your side through the past and the morrow…”

For some reason, the memory of the day he and Turandokht first met surfaced in his mind’s eye.

He’d just turned twelve that winter. One day, when he was playing his barbat in the deserted temple, singing along to the melancholy tune, the young princess Turandokht happened to pass by with her uncle’s caravan. While the merchants entered to pay their respects to the sacred flame, which had long been extinguished, she wandered through the gardens and came across the singing boy.

He gazed at the princess from his seat behind a pillar as he played. It was the beginning of winter; soft snow fluttered onto the strings of his barbat. As he plucked them, snowflakes scattered in the air, returning to the heavens and the earth.

From that day on, Turandokht visited this young priest often. During the winters and summers especially, she came and went between this temple and her hometown like a migratory bird. When autumn faded and winter arrived, A-Tai would don black robes and pray in front of the dying embers of the sacred flame, and Turandokht would bring money and food to place before the altar.

A-Tai's teacher was still alive then, until the year he turned fourteen. The saint's face was devoid of expression as she observed A-Tai glancing at Turandokht from the corner of his eye as he stood before the altar.

"The stars tell me she's not the woman destined to be your wife," she'd said to him.

Even now, the saint's voice seemed to ring in his ears as he sang, "*If fate grants me a bitter separation, I'll accept it without objection; if fate bestows upon me a joyous reunion, I'll enjoy it without reservation*."

When she died, A-Tai had personally set the saint's corpse alight. As fire reduced the last dastur of the holy temple to ashes, it was Turandokht who stood by his side.

"My father told me to pick a man to marry," she said that day. "You were the first person I thought of."

A-Tai turned to look at her. A gentle smile bloomed over her face, as dazzling as the flowers flourishing beside Lake Urmia in spring.

"I can't marry you," said A-Tai. "I've too much to do. You should marry someone else."

"I can wait," she replied. "Remember to come find me when you've done what you need to."

"If fate grants us a bitter separation, I'll accept it without objection; if fate bestows upon me a joyous reunion, I'll enjoy it without reservation," A-Tai sang once more. *"As long as I can see the rippling waters of the lake in your eyes once again…"*

Leaning against the table, Turandokht gazed outside into the courtyard, where the plum blossoms bloomed amid falling snow in the night.

"You can get back to your work." She smiled, as if A-Tai's song had made her forget all her regrets.

"I saw the lake rippling in your eyes, as deep and clear as the night sky," A-Tai sang, reaching the last lines. "*And in your eyes…*"

A-Tai abruptly stopped playing. His brow creased as the wisp of an idea flashed through his mind.

“What’s wrong?” Turandokht asked. “Are you hungry? I’ll make you something to eat.”

A-Tai raised a hand for silence, his mind racing. Suddenly he rose to his feet like a whirlwind. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” she asked. “What did you figure out?”

“We’ve searched every inch of land within a seventy-mile radius of Pengze, haven’t we?”

“Yes, but it’s all farmland,” Turandokht said, confused. “Just as it was decades ago. There’s nothing there.”

“But we missed one place—Poyang Lake! Let me see…” He pawed through a shelf that held scrolls about local bodies of water and pulled out a record about Poyang Lake. “Here!”

He rolled it open. “‘In autumn of the third year of Changshou, an ancient pathway was discovered when Poyang Lake receded from its banks. Huaiying—that’s Di Renjie’s courtesy name—led the guards in an investigation, which went on for a day and a night…’ This must be it—an old pathway that appeared under the lake during a drought!”

Night descended over Fanyang, and red lanterns cast their lurid glow upon the streets. The maniacal laughter of yao creating pandemonium rang out everywhere they went, heightening the sinister atmosphere. In an abandoned house, several skeletons lay in a pile under the bed, obviously left behind by the yao who’d eaten the humans who’d once lived there. Their devourers must have thought this house beneath them, departing without bothering to clean up after their meal.

To avoid the eyes of any yao roaming the streets, Mergen and Lu Xu had snatched the carp yao and snuck into this very house. They sat now on opposite sides of the dead family’s table, looking down at the carp yao, who lay on top of it with his mouth opening and closing.

“That’s everything,” he said. “Really. I swear!”

“Why are you lying down?” Lu Xu asked. “Can’t you speak standing up?”

“Ever since I came to You Prefecture, my heart’s been weak,” the carp yao said. “I can’t handle any big shocks.”

“Cut the crap!” Mergen snapped. “What is An Lushan planning?”

“He intends to conquer cities one by one, then send yao there to replace the human residents,” said the carp yao. “He’ll start with You Prefecture, then move on to Jiangnan and the Jing and Bing Prefectures. That way, he can surround the Central Plains before launching an armed rebellion. The human soldiers will fight on the front lines, and their yao counterparts will join the fray once they’re dead.”

“He doesn’t fear the Department of Exorcism at all?” Mergen asked.

“The department only has a handful of people. It will be powerless against all the yaoguai in this city,” the carp yao replied.

Lu Xu spoke up. “And how much of our confidential information did you share with them?”

Furious, the carp yao shot up. “None! I didn’t tell them anything!”

“He wouldn’t dare, right?” Mergen said to Lu Xu. “Not only did he work with us exorcists, he was also Xie Yu’s man—uh, fish. If An Lushan knew who he was, he wouldn’t have let him live this long.”

This only enraged the carp yao further. “That’s not why I kept my mouth shut!”

“Yeah, right,” Lu Xu said, sounding bored. “You’re doing all this for the sake of your brothers.”

Mergen scoffed. In his fury, Zhao Zilong had turned so red he resembled a brocade carp.

“The yao army looks huge, but they’re a ragtag crew, easy to deal with,” Mergen said coolly. “Once we cut off their head, they’re sure to disperse.”

“How do we do that?” Lu Xu asked. “Should we storm his residence now?”

Mergen looked down at the carp yao. “When is he planning to launch this rebellion?”

“I don’t know,” Zhao Zilong replied. “This is a secret of the highest order.” Under Mergen’s narrow scrutiny, he ventured, “Is Hongjun okay?”

“No idea,” both of them chorused.

“Who’s Hongjun?” Lu Xu asked.

“Don’t know who you’re talking about,” Mergen added.

The carp yao’s fish head drooped.

Lu Xu and Mergen traded a look. “Ah, I remember now,” Mergen said. “But whether I tell you depends on how well you perform.”

Although he felt a surge of pity for the carp yao, Lu Xu knew how complicated this issue was. It wasn’t his place to say anything, just as it wasn’t up to him to decide if the carp yao should be forgiven—that would depend on Li Jinglong.

“What do you need me to do?” the carp yao hurried to ask, seeing a glimmer of hope.

“As you see fit,” Mergen said. They’d already spent too much time here. “I’ll vouch for you if we run into the chief and Hongjun.”

“Where is he?” the carp yao asked.

Mergen was no idiot; there was no way he would reveal the others’ whereabouts or the department’s current plans to a traitor. He rose, motioning for Lu Xu to do the same.

“I’m going with you!” the carp yao cried out. “I want to go home!”

Mergen extended an arm to stop the carp yao as Lu Xu slipped out of the house. Lu Xu couldn’t help glancing back at the fish, still trailing insistently after Mergen.

“We should fly,” Lu Xu suggested, “or we’ll draw too much attention.”

Yet as soon as he turned into the white deer, the carp yao bounded forward and clung to his hind leg, refusing to let go.

“Get off me!” Lu Xu snapped.

“Take me home with you!” the carp yao begged. “Please!”

Mergen was adamant. “No.”

The white deer seemed to hesitate.

“Let’s go!” Mergen said. “We’re in a hurry!”

Lu Xu kicked his leg, sending the carp yao crashing to the ground.

“Third-in-Command, you’ve changed!” the carp yao cried.

“Do your job well,” said Mergen without turning back, “and Hongjun will come to forgive you one day.”

As the white deer rose into the air, prancing across the rooftops, the carp yao scrambled to his feet. “Wait! That day, when I was outside the department…”

But the white deer had flown away, disappearing into the night.

Chapter 136:
The Dragons' Destination

"WE NEED TO GET BACK to Chang'an as soon as possible," Mergen said. "Forget about looking for the artifacts."

"The stars are dim tonight," said the white deer. "I can't stay in the air for long."

"After we leave the city, you can land, and I'll carry you on my back."

Behind them, a swirling cloud of black mist rose from the city, barreling toward the white deer.

Mergen whipped his head around. "Lu Xu! Look out!"

The black mist overtook them with a roar, colliding with the white deer and knocking him out of the sky. Mergen flipped in midair and yanked Lu Xu—now in human form—into an embrace, and the two plummeted through the air, crashing down in the forest outside the city.

Mergen's shoulder bore the brunt of their landing; he howled in pain as his arm snapped.

"Lu Xu!" he called, shaking him. "Lu Xu!"

But Lu Xu was unconscious. The violent snarls of yao reached them from afar. Having sighted their enemy, the horde of yao in the city was now rushing out in pursuit.

Mergen transformed into the gray wolf. Depositing Lu Xu on his back, he broke into a run over the plains, his injured forelimb held aloft as he limped on three legs to escape Fanyang.

A scorching sun hung in skies hazy with yellow sand. In the barren, silent desert, the skeleton of a primordial dragon lay buried under the dunes.

Qiu Yongsi, Hongjun, and Ying Huo rode atop Xuan Ming's head. They had arrived on the fourth level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower, a world

where the desert was endless.

Xuan Ming circled the corpse. “What was his name?”

“I don’t remember.” Hongjun racked his brain, but the sight of the massive skeleton seemed to make it slip even further from him.

“It’s not important now—he’s already passed,” Ying Huo said. “He was the oldest among us—it was he who carried the Yellow Emperor[15] to the heavens from Lake Ding eons ago. We should keep moving.”

Xuan Ming reared back and rose into the sky, gathering breath in his lungs while Ying Huo inhaled lightly. Qiu Yongsi pressed his palms together in a gesture of prayer for the dead. The two dragons breathed out simultaneously, letting out a clear, melodious call reminiscent of the strike of a bell—sharp, yet not piercing. In a ritual unique to the dragon clan, they expressed their grief for the ancient dragon who had passed.

Their lament reverberated in Hongjun’s chest as they approached the pillar of light rising through the clouds from a cleared stretch of sand surrounded by rolling dunes.

Xuan Ming plunged headfirst into the light.

A deafening roar rang in their ears as a violent gust of wind caught them and flung them off course. Everyone screamed as the wind scattered them. Hongjun was shocked to find the winds so powerful here; even Xuan Ming, in his massive dragon form, was blown away.

“Hongjun!” Qiu Yongsi shouted.

Within moments, the winds had carried Hongjun far from the group. Qiu Yongsi, Ying Huo, and Xuan Ming were nothing but black dots in his sight, disappearing into the raging whirlwind. He summoned his sacred light, but there was nothing he could aim at, and the throwing knife he flung out was instantly snatched by the fierce gale. Hongjun raised a hand to call it back, but he was traveling faster than his blade.

Qiu Yongsi waved his brush, but there was nothing in this realm of howling winds that he could draw into a painting. Between the heavens and earth, above or below, it was only an endless, swirling void.

Transforming into a dragon, Ying Huo blasted flames toward the tempest. Xuan Ming shot gusts of icy breath, but their fire and ice were

immediately whisked away.

“Yongsi!” Hongjun yelled.

A wall of strong wind slammed into Hongjun, and he was but a weightless feather fluttering in a hurricane, tossed by the gale until he no longer knew up from down. Darkness descended over him—but barely a moment later, countless motes of light hurtled toward him like shooting stars, their radiance flooding his vision.

Hongjun’s heart thumped madly, on the verge of leaping out of his chest.

Somewhere in the distance, a dragon roared. In the eye of the gigantic vortex at the center of the fifth level, a dragon’s silhouette faded in and out of view. The tornado spun violently, spreading a cloud of black mist through the air.

“As puny as ants, yet so foolishly arrogant,” the dragon growled.

Hongjun turned back with difficulty to see tens of thousands of shooting stars spinning in the center of the tornado. These glowing threads of light had streaked through the darkness, only to be trapped within this whirling tempest.

That light was…the heart lamp!

“Li Jinglong?” Hongjun’s voice shook. “Li Jinglong!”

His cries were drowned by the raging winds. The black mist churned and roiled as the gleaming strands of the heart lamp’s light drew taut around the tornado and steered it toward Hongjun. The powerful winds around the eye of the cyclone pulled him into the vortex, and he fell swiftly toward the center.

Through the darkness engulfing his surroundings, he glimpsed a stone pillar in the calm center of the raging tempest. Standing upon it was Li Jinglong, whose combat robes billowed in the wind. Thousands of glowing threads of light, so bright they were nearly tangible, shot out from his palm toward the tornado. It felt like the end of the world—so oppressive was the darkness around them—yet Li Jinglong stood majestically amid it, like a divine god in the shadows.

Equally elated and frantic, Hongjun shouted, “Li Jinglong!”

Another draconic roar shattered the threads of spiritual power wrapped around the black tornado. Hongjun was so close to Li Jinglong, yet he could only cry out as he was dragged away by another tempestuous blast.

Li Jinglong thrust his hand out, and Hongjun did the same. In the fleeting instant that their paths crossed, they caught each other.

“Li Jinglong!” Hongjun shouted as tears streamed from his eyes and scattered in the wind.

“Come again?” Li Jinglong chided with a smile. Despite being separated for so long, he acted as though they’d been apart for mere minutes. They gripped each other’s wrists tightly, Hongjun gasping for breath as the squall whipped around them.

“What did you call me?” Li Jinglong said. “I think you’ve made a mistake. That’s not how you greet someone who came all this way to save you—call me Gege!”

“Ge… Gege…” Hongjun groaned. “Even now, you—”

Li Jinglong yanked Hongjun forward. The moment Hongjun’s feet touched down beside him, the stone pillar they were standing on began to give way.

“Hold on!” Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun wrapped his arms around Li Jinglong’s waist. A dragon suddenly reared in front of the pillar, every inch of it white as snow, save for the black mist clouding its scaly brow. Eyes snapping open, the dragon king snarled.

As the whirlwind swiftly converged toward the stone pillar at its eye, Li Jinglong made a fist. A longbow, curved like the crescent moon, appeared in his grip—another form of the heart lamp in his soul. He crooked three fingers and dragged his hand back as though pulling back the bowstring, and a bright arrow, shaped from the powers of the heart lamp, materialized in thin air.

Wordlessly, Hongjun looked up at Li Jinglong’s profile. The image of him drawing the bow was so handsome Hongjun’s heart pounded wildly.

“Look at the enemy—what are you looking at me for?” Li Jinglong teased, his mouth quirking up as though he’d felt Hongjun’s heart skip a beat. As the power of the heart lamp reached its peak, he released the arrow, sending it singing through the air in a streak of white light. Instead of plunging into the dragon king’s forehead, it exploded into countless shafts of brilliance that shone in all directions, spiraling madly.

Sensing danger, the dragon king twisted to look toward the lights. Li Jinglong raised two fingers in a sword seal and flicked his wrist, directing the scattered beams of the heart lamp’s power toward the dragon king’s brow. Light flashed; another deafening roar shook them as the black mist clouding the dragon king’s forehead dispersed with a loud *boom.* The tornado whirling around them vanished, leaving only the outer wall of wind Hongjun had crashed through when they’d entered the fifth level.

“It worked!” Hongjun whooped.

“Keep your voice down,” Li Jinglong said, amused. He exhaled deeply and turned to meet Hongjun’s gaze. “I was late,” he said, somewhat nervously. “You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Hongjun shook his head, and Li Jinglong leaned in to kiss him hard.

The moment the tornado vanished, the Dragon King of Wind flew out toward the outer wall of wind. Xuan Ming and Ying Huo dove after him.

On the other side of the barrier of wind, Ashina Adarvan was screaming at the top of his lungs; he had already thrown up from spinning so violently. Immediately after he emptied his guts, he was whisked away by another whirlwind.

Ying Huo snatched him out of the air. “Who’s this?”

“Adarvan!” Qiu Yongsi called out, dizzy as well. “Where’s the dragon king?”

“Take everyone!” Xuan Ming shouted to Ying Huo over the wind. “We’re going up to the sixth level! Grab the brat making these tornadoes too!”

Locked in a fierce embrace, Hongjun and Li Jinglong paid the raging winds around them no heed as they entwined in a deep kiss. Li Jinglong

held Hongjun so tightly it was as though he wanted to merge Hongjun's body into his own.

"Damn it guys, stop kissing!" Qiu Yongsi bellowed as he came flying toward them on Xuan Ming's back. "We need to get out of here!"

Reluctantly, Li Jinglong and Hongjun broke apart. Li Jinglong looped an arm around Hongjun's waist, and they leapt down from the crumbling pillar onto Xuan Ming's back. Ying Huo breathed a blast of fire toward the Dragon King of Wind, who hung unconscious within the wind barrier walling off the center of the level. The dragon king jerked awake in pain, roaring. Disoriented, he flew out of the barrier and followed in their wake.

With a flash of light, they entered the sixth level—a vast forest.

Finally reunited with their companions, everyone felt as though they'd been reborn. Li Jinglong led the group to a pond at the edge of the trees, where the Dragon King of Poison, whom Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan had encountered on their way down, sat waiting for them. A wound gaped at his throat where the exorcists had removed the demonic parasite with the powers of the heart lamp before descending into the realm of wind.

Hongjun looked at him appraisingly. "Your name is Shu Hai."

The Dragon King of Poison's eyes snapped open, bright with joy. Spotting Ying Huo and the other dragon kings, he rose and led his companions to the lakeshore.

"Let's take a break here," Li Jinglong said, motioning for the exorcists to sit down on the bank. He hadn't let go of Hongjun's hand for an instant.

Hongjun's heart had been at peace since the moment he saw Li Jinglong. He immediately began regaling him with tales of everything they'd seen on the way here. Li Jinglong listened attentively, shooting a chastising look at Qiu Yongsi now and then; Qiu Yongsi could do nothing but grimace.

Ashina Adarvan was torn between laughter and tears. "I suppose I have only myself to blame for coming in here," he said. "Just my luck."

“This is all my fault,” Qiu Yongsi said, resigned. Upon hearing that Xie Yu had escaped the tower, he had become even more dismayed. The situation had only gotten worse.

“I was worried you wouldn’t find a way to enter the tower,” Hongjun said to Li Jinglong. “Imagine if I ended up stuck here for a hundred years.”

“I’d come after you even if it killed me,” Li Jinglong replied. “How could I not?”

Hongjun frowned. “What about Xie Yu and An Lushan—everything outside?”

“I don’t care about that,” Li Jinglong said without hesitation.

Hongjun was speechless.

“As I was going through each level of the tower searching for you,” Li Jinglong said, a smile spreading over his face, “for some reason, I kept thinking that even if we ended up getting stuck here for our whole lives, it must be the will of the heavens.”

“Hey,” Ashina Adarvan protested. “Maybe you’re fine staying here, Chief, but *I* want to get out of this tower, so quit talking like that. And enough with the flirting; you’re making the rest of us feel bad.”

Hongjun giggled, but Li Jinglong was yawning. “Let me take a nap,” he said. “I’m exhausted. I can’t do this anymore…”

He burrowed his head into Hongjun’s chest, and Hongjun wrapped an arm around him. After forcing himself to stay awake for three whole days, Li Jinglong was out the moment he shut his eyes.

Hongjun stroked his cheek and bent to kiss him gently on the lips.

“I’m about to pass out too,” Ashina Adarvan said. “I don’t care anymore. I’m getting some shut-eye even if the heavenly emperor himself shows up.”

He lay on the ground and instantly went to sleep. Qiu Yongsi and Hongjun had taken more breaks during their journey, but they, too, were exhausted. It wasn’t long before both of them drifted off as well.

Xuan Ming and Ying Huo had now been joined by Fei Lian, the Dragon King of Wind, and Shu Hai, the Dragon King of Poison. They stood

by the side in their human forms, discussing quietly among themselves.

"How many have escaped the fifth level?" Ying Huo asked.

In this form, Fei Lian, the youngest of the dragon kings, appeared about Hongjun's age. He sighed. "A hundred and forty-one—they've all flown up to the ninth level."

"What will we do with the jiao who broke through the seals and fled to the topmost level?" Xuan Ming asked.

"We'll deal with them according to the rules," Fei Lian said. "They all must be exiled to the abyss."

"If we do that, only a handful of jiao will be left," Ying Huo said calmly.

The four dragon kings fell silent. After Xie Yu had killed Ye Ming and broken the barriers separating the levels, almost all the jiao had escaped the dragons' supervision, surging toward the ninth level. They obviously planned to wait till Ye Ming died and the tower collapsed to break out of their prison together.

By rights, they should all be cast down into the abyss. Shu Hai, who had yet to speak, pointed upward—Ye Ming, whose soul still presided over the tower, should be the one to decide.

"We are all injured," Xuan Ming said. "And Ye Ming cannot fight anymore. Even if we want to lock them in the abyss, it's beyond our capabilities."

The demonic parasites that had twisted the dragons had been slain, but they'd already drained the dragon kings' vitality; only through sheer determination had the dragon kings persevered until now. At this point, it was hard to say who'd win the battle if the horde of jiao joined forces to attack them. Without its prison wardens, the Dragon-Quelling Tower would be engulfed in chaos.

"Perhaps they could…" Ying Huo turned his gaze toward the exorcists, sleeping in a haphazard pile.

"We cannot ask for help from mortals again," Xuan Ming said. "Our affairs are none of their concern. The recent catastrophes in the mortal realm can all be traced back to Xie Yu's escape, which came about due to

our failure of duty. Look at us; combined, our lifespans are longer than that of the heavens and earth. How can we go peacefully to our rest if we leave this to these frail mortals?”

The other dragon kings hung their heads, faces ashen with shame.

Almost ten hours later, Hongjun was awakened by his growling stomach. He hadn’t eaten anything since entering the tower, over sixty hours ago. This was a new record. The last time he’d gone even close to this long without eating was when he’d had a row with Chong Ming. In a fit of pique, he’d starved himself for a full forty-eight hours.

Hongjun shook Li Jinglong awake. “I’m so hungry I’m going to die. What if we ate one of the dragon kings?”

Li Jinglong hoped he was too tired to have heard him correctly.

“Worst case, we can work together to kill a jiao,” Qiu Yongsi put in. “I’m the Dragon-Quelling Immortal, so offing a jiao or two should be fine.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Li Jinglong groggily fished out a bag of dry rations. The moment he opened it, Hongjun snatched it away. His and Qiu Yongsi’s eyes gleamed greedily as they stuffed their mouths full of food.

Li Jinglong rose to wash his face in the pond and returned with some water for Hongjun.

“Give me some too,” Ashina Adarvan said. “I threw up everything I ate in that tornado.”

Li Jinglong watched Hongjun inhale the rations. He only fished a few pieces out for himself after Hongjun was done, chewing slowly. After a moment’s thought, he said, “The dragon king on the seventh level is dead.”

“Mm.” Hongjun nodded.

“But I haven’t figured out how we should fight the dragon king on the eighth level,” Li Jinglong continued. “We have several dragon kings on our side now, so it should be doable, but we can’t let our guard down.”

Everyone pushed to their feet. Xuan Ming had exhausted himself, so it was Fei Lian, still bleeding from his forehead, who carried the exorcists

and the three other dragon kings up to the seventh level.

Heavy rain sluiced over them as soon as they flew through the portal. This world contained only boundless oceans with no shore. Hongjun erected a barrier of sacred light to shield everyone from the downpour as they soared over the colossal skeleton of the Dragon King of Water, heading toward the pillar of light in the distance.

“Two dragon kings dead,” Li Jinglong said. “We’ll make Xie Yu pay for this.”

“Human or dragon, we all meet our end eventually,” Ying Huo said. “We dragons look upon all beings with disdain in life yet nurture them with our bodies in death. Is this not a fitting fate for us?”

“Why did you agree to be confined within the Dragon-Quelling Tower?” Li Jinglong asked.

“For one reason alone—this has been the destination at the end of our journey all along,” Xuan Ming answered.

“The Dragon-Quelling Tower…” Li Jinglong said in realization. “This is meant to be a burial ground for dragons?”

None of the dragon kings answered, but Li Jinglong finally understood. In their human forms, these dragon kings looked like young men, but their conversations were those of beings who’d lived close to ten millennia. They had come to the Dragon-Quelling Tower of their own volition because they were waiting to go to their final rest.

Chapter 137:
Imminent Departure

As the four dragon kings flew over the immense skeleton, they chanted solemnly, as though holding a simple funeral for the Dragon King of Water. The higher they rose in the pagoda, the smaller each level became; they reached the portal to the eighth level in hardly any time at all.

Li Jinglong had given the dragon kings a brief account of their flight through the lightning storm when he and Ashina Adarvan had passed through the eighth level on their way down.

"Don't worry," Xuan Ming said. "We'll use the full extent of our power to subdue him."

"His name is Feng Kui," Li Jinglong said. The names came to him more easily than to Hongjun—after all, the book in which the names were mentioned was his to begin with.

In fact, this bestiary had an interesting history: As a child, Li Jinglong had first passed the *Compendium of Demonic Exorcism* to Hongjun, who'd returned it to him after reading it. Later, this book had passed through Qing Xiong's hands back to Hongjun, who had once again given it to Li Jinglong. When Li Jinglong had gotten his hands on it again, he had been sure to read the book thoroughly. Thus he easily identified the prison wardens of the Dragon-Quelling Tower in front of him with the primordial dragon kings described in the book.

According to the compendium, the dragon god Ye Ming commanded eight dragon kings: Xuan Ming, Ying Huo, Feng Kui, Fei Lian, Shu Hai, Lian Wen, Bing Zhu, and Li Mu. Each dragon king presided over one of the Eight Trigrams, which corresponded to eight elements of nature: sky, fire, thunder, wind, water, the marsh, the mountains, and the earth. Seven of the eight dragon kings had appeared; the last, who guarded the abyss, had ostensibly died long ago.

Li Jinglong had mulled the matter over, only for many doubts to surface. But uncovering the truth of what had transpired in the past

wouldn’t help them now, so he’d set his questions aside.

“Brace yourselves,” Xuan Ming said. “We’re going up to the eighth level!”

Everyone held their breath. Light flashed, and the dragon kings all shifted back into their colossal draconic forms.

Upon spotting invaders, the Dragon King of Lightning, Feng Kui, charged toward them with a guttural hiss. The eighth level was utter chaos; lightning split the sky, its flashes so blinding Hongjun could hardly open his eyes. Fei Lian set the exorcists on the ground, then rose into the sky with his brethren to sink his fangs into Feng Kui’s scaled body. Lightning crackled and spat as they dragged him toward the ground.

“Now!” Qiu Yongsi cried.

He sprinted forward, turning bits of crushed stone flying through the air into specks of ink with a wave of his brush. Li Jinglong was right behind him. As the enormous body of Feng Kui plummeted toward the ground, he sheathed his sword, and the brilliant crescent of the heart-lamp longbow materialized in his hand.

Li Jinglong nocked two arrows of light and let fly. They whistled through the air, white plumes of flame trailing as they pierced straight through the demonic parasites clinging to Feng Kui’s horns. Burned by the heart lamp, the dragon king thrashed as he crumpled to the ground and fell still.

The lightning crisscrossing the skies vanished, and an eerie silence descended. The remaining three green jiao who’d escaped toward the portal had returned. Fearful of the dragon kings’ might, they watched from a distance.

Feng Kui’s massive body slowly shrank until his scales vanished, and a middle-aged man lay face down on the ground.

“Everything has come to an end,” Fei Lian said to him. “Wake up from your nightmares, Feng Kui.”

A breeze drifted past. Feng Kui slowly opened his eyes. Dazed, he murmured, “What happened?”

The dragon kings helped their companion to stand. Li Jinglong had assumed this would be an earthshaking battle, yet it had ended so quickly. It seemed dragons had a much easier time than humans when it came to fighting other dragons—human strength was insignificant compared to these ancient creatures', after all.

They set off across the barren, rocky land of the eighth level. As though struck by the same thought, Ashina Adarvan commented, "If the jiao and dragons in this tower ever escape, we'll all be in deep shit."

"This is why the great task of guarding the tower has been passed down for generations," Qiu Yongsi said.

Li Jinglong gave Qiu Yongsi a thoughtful look.

"Yongsi-ge," Hongjun said, "after we go up to the ninth level, do you still have to spend two centuries repairing the barrier?"

Qiu Yongsi smiled, but it was a melancholy expression. This was Li Jinglong's first time hearing about Qiu Yongsi's mission here, but he merely nodded without asking any more questions.

At last they arrived at the ninth level, at the base of the pagoda where Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan had escaped the jiao's attack when they first entered the tower. As they ascended the stairs past each tier in turn, Hongjun exclaimed in surprise.

"This is where I lived when I was a child," Qiu Yongsi said with a smile.

He picked up some old clothes he used to wear from the floor, then went to the dressing table and looked down at the comb, rouge, and powder among his mother's belongings. It felt like just yesterday that they had lived here.

"I'll come back to look at these later," Qiu Yongsi murmured to himself before leading his friends to the topmost tier.

Ye Ming was just where they had left him, monitoring the time barrier. Qiu Yongsi slowly advanced and fished out the glass bottle. "I've brought your ashes back, Your Divine Majesty."

Ye Ming turned to gaze at Qiu Yongsi. His eyes widened at the sight of the dragon kings ranged behind him. "Is it just the five of you left?"

“The others have passed,” Ying Huo replied, bowing to Ye Ming.

Xuan Ming uttered a strange sound, like the clang of metal, and the dragon kings began conversing in their own tongue.

Qiu Yongsi seemed tense with nerves as he stood quietly nearby. Li Jinglong guessed there were some things the dragons couldn’t divulge to outsiders; after listening a while, he motioned for Hongjun to come downstairs with him and Ashina Adarvan.

They returned to the room that Qiu Yongsi had lived in. Li Jinglong tidied up the bed and had Hongjun lie down before passing out more food and water.

“What’s the date outside now?” Hongjun asked, wondering how much his friends might have changed during his time in the tower.

“Four and a half days have passed since we entered the tower,” Ashina Adarvan replied. “Three or four months outside.”

Thank goodness, Hongjun thought, relieved. *That’s shorter than I expected*.

Li Jinglong slipped his hand into Hongjun’s, and they leaned quietly against each other on the bed.

“I’m sure Yongsi will send us out any minute now,” Ashina Adarvan said. “But I still can’t relax. We really did let down our guard—we fell right into Xie Yu’s trap. Who knows what’s happening out there.”

“It’s fine,” Li Jinglong said, lost in thought. “We’ve been here so long already; it won’t matter if we stay a little while longer.” He turned to Hongjun. “What did Yongsi tell you?”

Hongjun relayed what Qiu Yongsi had said about his task before they entered the tower.

Li Jinglong nodded. The three exorcists sighed. They were finally out of danger—but now that the ashes were delivered, it was time for them to bid Qiu Yongsi farewell.

“I never thought this would be how we’d part with Yongsi,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun couldn’t bear it. “Can’t the dragon kings help Yongsi-ge speed up the repairs?” Although he hadn’t spent much time alone with Qiu Yongsi, he had grown accustomed to the rapport they shared. Things wouldn’t be the same without him.

“We can come visit him,” Li Jinglong reassured him. “Even if ten years have passed outside, it’ll only be a few days for him in here.”

Hongjun was quiet—what could he say? Their separation was inevitable.

“Time spent together in joy always feels fleeting,” Ashina Adarvan said, “while goodbyes remain eternal.”

Everyone lapsed into silence.

“After we leave the tower, can I go back to Yaojin Palace for a visit?” Hongjun asked.

“Of course,” Li Jinglong said.

Both of them seemed to have forgotten what had happened the last time they’d gone back to Yaojin Palace. Hongjun missed Chong Ming—that was all there was to it. Li Jinglong didn’t hold his father-in-law’s actions against him. He’d managed to seal the demon seed through his own efforts; now he could prove to Chong Ming that Hongjun was safest at his side.

“Do you think I’d be welcome there?” Ashina Adarvan asked suddenly.

Hongjun laughed. “Sure, why not?”

“I heard your family’s the richest of all of us,” Ashina Adarvan said. “Could you lend us some money?”

Li Jinglong raised his eyebrows at this request—Ashina Adarvan had broached a topic the others rarely brought up. He knew Ashina Adarvan and A-Tai were short the money they needed to restore their nation, but they’d never asked to borrow from their friends. Even after witnessing the opulence of Cloud Villa, neither had asked Qiu Yongsi for a loan.

“Let me talk to my dad,” Hongjun said.

“When A-Tai restores our nation, we’ll make you a little prince,” Ashina Adarvan joked. “We’ll tell everyone you’re our youngest brother.”

“Sounds great,” Hongjun replied with a laugh.

Eyes narrowing, Li Jinglong asked, “Why are you borrowing money from Hongjun all of a sudden? I thought you guys wanted to do this on your own.”

“Borrowing from Xiao-Kong is fine,” Ashina Adarvan said nonchalantly. “He’s one of ours.”

“Like hell he is,” Li Jinglong said.

While Hongjun looked back and forth between them in confusion, Ashina Adarvan burst into hearty laughter. “It seems I’ve given you the wrong idea, Chief. Maybe I should have stayed outside after all and left you to play the hero by yourself. Did you assume I came in here for your sake? Why would I bother with this, if not for Xiao-Kong?”

Li Jinglong’s words stuck in his throat. “You—”

“Thank you for coming in here to save me,” Hongjun said quickly, squeezing both Ashina Adarvan’s and Li Jinglong’s hands.

“You’re welcome,” Ashina Adarvan said, clearing the air. “We’re all good friends, so I’m happy to help.”

Resolving to drop the matter, Li Jinglong nodded. But Ashina Adarvan continued, “I’m much happier to help when it’s *you*, though.”

Li Jinglong fell into a resigned silence.

This conversation was too much for Hongjun to handle. He considered carefully, then asked, “How much money do you need?”

“That’s just the way,” Ashina Adarvan said approvingly. “You don’t like me back; it’s fine. Lend me some money and we’ll call it even. Not a bad deal, right?”

“That’s enough, Ashina Adarvan,” Li Jinglong warned. “Don’t go overboard.”

Ashina Adarvan studied them, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Chief, find me a match, won’t you? It’s not just you two lovebirds; Mergen and A-Tai are always with their partners too. Don’t you feel sorry for me?”

This was the last thing Hongjun expected Ashina Adarvan to say. Li Jinglong replied, “Isn’t Yongsi single? Shall I set the two of you up?”

Ashina Adarvan’s mouth dropped open in horror. “Absolutely not!”

Hongjun laughed; he couldn’t imagine Qiu Yongsi and Ashina Adarvan together. Li Jinglong teased, “I’ll find you a nice boy once we get out of here.”

Ashina Adarvan liked young men too. Li Jinglong knew he’d set his sights on Hongjun the moment he joined the team in Dunhuang. Even after they’d returned to Chang’an, he couldn’t help flirting with the oblivious Hongjun, despite both A-Tai and Mergen warning him off. In fact, he’d only given up after Li Jinglong’s public confession to Hongjun under the moonlight.

Li Jinglong was confident Hongjun had no feelings for Ashina Adarvan—not when he and Hongjun had been together so long, and especially since the heart lamp had forged a bond like fated lovers between them. But Ashina Adarvan had remained single since he’d joined their group; given how much time the members of the Department spent together, Li Jinglong always felt a bit uneasy about his proximity to Hongjun.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs as Qiu Yongsi descended from the top of the building. He stopped on the landing and took a deep breath. “You must all be exhausted. Leave it to me; I’ll think of a way to get you guys out of here as soon as I can.”

Ashina Adarvan stretched his arms overhead. “Take care, my friend.”

Hongjun was about to get up and bid Qiu Yongsi goodbye as well when Li Jinglong pressed down on his shoulder. “Let’s not say our goodbyes just yet.” He turned to Qiu Yongsi. “What other problems are you dealing with? Go on, tell us.”

“There’s nothing else,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile.

“Nothing?” Li Jinglong asked. “That’s not what the dragon kings said just now.”

Hongjun started in surprise, while Qiu Yongsi froze. “You understand dragontongue?”

Everyone fell silent. The corner of Li Jinglong’s mouth quirked slightly as he studied Qiu Yongsi’s stricken expression.

“You tricked me!” Qiu Yongsi yelped. In fact, Li Jinglong hadn’t understood a single word the dragon kings had said. He was merely trying to get a reaction from him—and succeeded.

“Is there something we can help with?” Hongjun asked.

“You can’t fool me,” Li Jinglong said impatiently. “I wouldn’t be a very good chief if you could. Spit it out.”

“But how did you know?” Qiu Yongsi pressed.

“Why did all the dragon kings come up to the ninth level?” Li Jinglong rose from the bed. “Something must have gone wrong down below. Those old dragons all looked so preoccupied on the way here; they weren’t even trying to hide it.”

Left with no other choice, Qiu Yongsi came clean. “All right, I’ll be honest with you. I’ve just had an argument with them upstairs. Even if we return Ye Ming’s ashes now, he won’t last for long. When Xie Yu was imprisoned in the abyss, he tampered with the core of the array that holds the tower together. Someone needs to go down into the abyss and restore it.”

Qiu Yongsi led his three companions back up to the top floor of the pagoda. “They’re here,” he announced to the dragon kings.

“Please impart your wisdom to us,” Li Jinglong said politely.

“You need someone to die, don’t you?” Ashina Adarvan asked. “Seems I’m the only choice.”

There was an uneasy beat of silence. “No one needs to die,” Qiu Yongsi replied. “At least, not for now.”

“To rebuild the time barrier in this tower, my energy must be transported all the way to the bottom of the abyss,” Ye Ming explained. “But the portals between the levels have been displaced. They are all out of alignment.”

The pillars of light they’d seen throughout their journey formed the axis of the Dragon-Quelling Tower. Located at the center of each level, these portals originally linked their way down the tower like the vertebrae of a dragon’s spine. When Xie Yu had escaped the Dragon-Quelling Tower the first time, he had destroyed the spiritual array in the darkest depths of

the abyss, displacing all the portals in the process. To rebuild the time barrier, it seemed, the portals had to be realigned before Ye Ming could establish the connection between them.

“The array consists of two concentric rings.” Ye Ming flicked his sleeve, and two circles, one nested inside the other, appeared in midair. “I have no exact knowledge of the damage done to the array, but my guess is Xie Yu knocked the rings out of alignment, which is what caused the portals to be displaced.”

“How do you know he didn’t destroy the array entirely?” Li Jinglong asked.

“That’s impossible,” Ye Ming said. “This array draws on the earthly meridians themselves. Xie Yu could never destroy it, no matter how powerful he becomes.”

“Well, why aren’t you guys going down there?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

After a long silence, Xuan Ming answered. “To safeguard this array from dragons and jiao alike, the immortal who built this tower surrounded it with the Dragon-Corroding Pool. Any of us who dares approach will suffer its effects.”

“How did Xie Yu reach the array, then?” Li Jinglong asked, astonished.

Ye Ming shrugged; for this, he had no explanation. “Perhaps he was shielded by demonic energy, or mayhap he had other means,” he said. “Whatever it was, it allowed him to get past the pool. If you choose to enter the abyss, I believe you’ll be able to find your answers there.”

Chapter 138:
An Oath of Dragon Scales

As Li Jinglong mulled this over, Ashina Adarvan spoke up. “I’ll go. Just tell me how to realign the portals.”

“You’ll need two people,” Qiu Yongsi said.

“You and me?” Ashina Adarvan asked, bemused. “I can’t believe the chief called it.”

“If I’m not wrong, Yongsi needs to stay here,” Li Jinglong said.

Qiu Yongsi nodded with a bitter smile.

Ye Ming explained, “When the repairs begin, my soul will take the form of a dragon. I won’t be able to sustain my current strength, which means Yongsi will have to rebuild the spiritual array in my stead. The Dragon-Quelling Tower will be plunged into unrest, warping time and creating a powerful turbulence that will destroy even this pagoda. Without its protection, someone will have to guard Yongsi from the jiao’s attacks.”

Li Jinglong turned to the dragon kings. “What will you do?”

“We will lead the jiao back to our respective levels,” Xuan Ming answered. “Those unwilling to return will be cast into the abyss.”

The dragon kings, despite their exhaustion, still inspired fear and reverence. The jiao outside the pagoda had all stopped attacking once the five dragon kings ascended to the ninth level. Although they were still twisting through the skies above them, they seemed to realize that judgment was imminent, and that their days of freedom were coming to an end. The door to the outside world would remain shut, never to be opened again.

Everyone fell quiet. Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun. When their eyes met, Hongjun’s heart thumped in his chest, as though he already knew what Li Jinglong was going to ask.

“I’m staying with you,” Hongjun said, breaking the silence. “I’ll follow you no matter where you go.”

“The abyss, then,” Li Jinglong said. “Do you dare to follow me even there?”

Hongjun nodded, and they smiled at each other, a gentle warmth blooming between them. Whether it was traveling to the ends of the earth or descending to the deepest depths of hell, they would always be together, never to part.

“With their help, you will no longer need to spend two hundred days repairing the time barrier,” Ye Ming said to Qiu Yongsi.

“But you’ll be…” Qiu Yongsi couldn’t bear to finish the sentence.

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Ye Ming said. “My energy lives on in you. Go, my child. You are the one who will mend the mistakes I’ve made.”

Ye Ming laid a spectral hand on Qiu Yongsi’s shoulder. Where his energy flowed, Qiu Yongsi’s combat robes split open, revealing his muscular torso and the river of dragon scales coiling across his back, shoulders, and powerful arms.

Li Jinglong and Ashina Adarvan were astonished; this was their first time seeing the scales on Qiu Yongsi’s body. “Yongsi,” Ashina Adarvan choked out. “You—”

“I…” Slightly abashed, Qiu Yongsi said, “I never told you guys about this—I was born in the Dragon-Quelling Tower.”

From what he’d seen of the pagoda, Ashina Adarvan had already guessed as much.

“My mother had a difficult labor,” Qiu Yongsi continued. “Ye Ming saved my life by bestowing some of his energy upon me.”

After a brief silence, Li Jinglong began, “In that case…since we’re done here, we should get going. My only concern is how much time will pass outside the tower during the repairs.”

“It shouldn’t take long,” Ye Ming answered. “The flow of time will be unstable once the barrier is repaired, but it should settle after about a day.”

This was the only way, whether Li Jinglong liked it or not. It seemed they would be here a little longer than planned.

“Shall we go back down to the ground floor?” Noticing how Hongjun was fidgeting, he asked, “Hongjun? Do you have something to say?”

Hongjun turned to Ye Ming. “Your Divine Majesty, I have a question. How can an aquatic creature—say, a fish—become a dragon?”

While Ye Ming thought this over, Hongjun told him of the carp yao’s lifelong dream. Eventually, Ye Ming replied, “It is not easy for a carp to achieve this feat. First, he must cultivate without pause for at least ten lifetimes, accumulating merits in each one. Then, he must be enlightened by an immortal or a Buddha. Only then can he overcome his heavenly tribulation, shed his mortal body, and become a dragon.”

Hongjun thought of Yuan Kun. “Could a yao king enlighten him?”

“What do you think?” Ye Ming asked, his words colored with amusement.

Hongjun fell silent. Yuan Kun was powerful—enough to see into the future and understand the workings of fate—yet he was still a far cry from a dragon god like Ye Ming, much less an immortal or Buddha.

“Time is short,” Li Jinglong said. “Let’s get going.”

“Thank you. Both of you,” Qiu Yongsi said, guilt dampening his voice.

Li Jinglong patted Qiu Yongsi on the shoulder and smiled. He pointed a finger at Ashina Adarvan. “You stay here and protect Yongsi.”

“A word of warning.” Qiu Yongsi looked squarely at Li Jinglong and Hongjun. “Some of the jiao may not want to go with the dragon kings. When you descend into the abyss, I’ll give you a piece of bait that will entice them into following you.”

“Wait,” Ye Ming called. “Dragon kings, bow to them.”

The five dragon kings each bowed to the exorcists. Li Jinglong shifted awkwardly.

“The Dragon-Quelling Tower nearly brought calamity down upon the mortal world due to my lapse in judgment,” Ye Ming said, turning back to them. “For helping me rebuild the time barrier, the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism has my sincere gratitude. Empress Nüwa was right:

Humans may be small and weak, but they possess more might than any other living creature."

Hearing these words from a primordial dragon shook Hongjun to the core. Although only half the blood flowing through his veins was human, he nevertheless felt a surge of pride. He glanced at Li Jinglong.

Li Jinglong was the only ordinary mortal in the Department of Exorcism—and he was also the only one among them who'd persevered throughout this arduous journey without once admitting defeat. Even before he had the heart lamp, when he had no spiritual power at all, Li Jinglong had never faltered in his conviction, despite encountering more obstacles than anyone else.

"It was my pleasure to assist you," Li Jinglong said evenly. "This is part and parcel of my duty to guard the Divine Land. It's my job to protect Hongjun, my friends, and all living beings."

Li Jinglong's Department of Exorcism uniform was worn and tattered after their grueling journey, but as he stood opposite Ye Ming, he looked completely at ease, emitting an aura no less imposing than any king or divine being. When Hongjun looked at him, he was struck by the feeling that Li Jinglong was even mightier than yao kings like Chong Ming, Qing Xiong, and Yuan Kun.

Ying Huo pinched one of his scales between his fingers and held it out to Li Jinglong. "This is the Oath of Fire. If you find yourself in peril, this venerable one will rise to the occasion. I will help you with all the strength I have."

Ashina Adarvan gaped in shock as Xuan Ming stepped forward and handed Li Jinglong a second scale. "This is the Oath of Ice. No matter how much time may pass, I will remember what you've done for us today."

Fei Lian was next. "This is the Oath of Wind. The favor you have rendered us will never be forgotten. You have my eternal gratitude, Brother."

Bewildered, Li Jinglong hastily insisted he wasn't worthy of such an honor.

Shu Hai's throat had healed thanks to Ye Ming, but his voice was still hoarse. "This is the Oath of the Marsh."

Feng Kui was the last to hand Li Jinglong a scale. “This is the Oath of Thunder. With these five scales, you may summon us to any place at any time, and we will come without fail.”

Li Jinglong hurriedly said his thanks.

“I’ve never been given a dragon scale, you know,” Qiu Yongsi remarked with a smile.

“I’ll safeguard them with my life,” Li Jinglong promised.

“The dragon kings will uphold this oath until the end of their days,” Ye Ming said. “Even if you summon them to terrorize the Divine Land and make you the mortal emperor, they will dedicate themselves fully to your cause.”

“I would never do such a thing,” Li Jinglong said at once. “It is neither my fate to rule these lands, nor is it my wish to do so. After I leave the tower, I will entrust these scales to my brothers. I would never have succeeded alone; this was only possible thanks to the efforts of every member of the Department of Exorcism.”

Hongjun beamed upon hearing these words. Li Jinglong took his hand.

Throwing their heads back in a drawn-out cry, the five dragon kings burst out of the pagoda and transformed, radiating an air of power as they wheeled in the sky, rising higher and higher. Ye Ming inhaled deeply and turned his face to the empty sky, letting out a mighty roar. Dragontongue reverberated through the clouds of the ninth level in a storm of long and short calls that seemed to go on without end. He appeared to be reproaching the horde of jiao who’d stirred up trouble in their desire to escape their prison.

Qiu Yongsi couldn’t help looking up, until Li Jinglong asked him, “What do we do next?”

Coming back to his senses, Qiu Yongsi said, “Wait for me.”

The horde of jiao split into several smaller groups that clustered around each of the five dragon kings. It seemed the jiao who came from the levels without a dragon king naturally knew to follow the one guarding the

level below theirs: The jiao from the seventh level flocked toward Shu Hai, and those from the fourth level convened around Ying Huo.

Breathing in deeply again, Ye Ming let out a sustained call, to which Feng Kui responded with a melancholic cry of his own. Both he and the hundreds of jiao around him turned into specks of light and vanished with a crack like thunder.

Ye Ming's might was fully unleashed; he had once again become the divine dragon commanding all mortal beings. He called out to Shu Hai, who responded with a distant cry. There was another resounding *crack*, and Shu Hai and his swarm of jiao vanished as well.

While the dragon kings disappeared one after another, Qiu Yongsi whipped his brush through the air, drawing a sigil. Sensing a disturbance in the flow of energy, a number of jiao left the dragon kings they were following and turned on the exorcists instead, hissing as they glared down from the sky. Yet, intimidated by Ye Ming's power, they dared not come closer.

All five dragons had returned to their respective levels, yet there were still nearly a hundred jiao remaining. They streaked through the air toward where Qiu Yongsi stood at the top of the pagoda.

Qiu Yongsi drew the final stroke of the sigil. It began to whirl rapidly around the tip of his brush, emitting a blue glow.

"Take this!" Qiu Yongsi passed the brush to Hongjun. "Don't let go of it! Now, go!"

Gripping the brush, Hongjun took his place by Li Jinglong's side. Li Jinglong pulled him closer, looping an arm around his waist.

"Go!" Qiu Yongsi repeated, his voice tense. He formed a hand seal and pushed it toward Li Jinglong. Ye Ming, standing behind them, pressed a hand to the center of Li Jinglong's back.

A flash of bright light enveloped them. At the same instant, they felt the pagoda collapse, brick and stone flying in all directions. Hongjun cried out as he and Li Jinglong crashed to the bottommost tier of the pagoda, where the glowing vortex beneath their feet swallowed them like a monster devouring spiritual energy.

Ye Ming's ashes scattered gently through the air. His image shone for a final moment before fading, becoming one with the drifting dust.

The platform Ashina Adarvan and Qiu Yongsi stood on, once the pagoda's ninth tier, was now floating in the sky. The remaining jiao flocked toward them, recklessly diving toward the collapsed base of the tower.

"What's going on?" Ashina Adarvan exclaimed in shock.

"I used the riverscape brush to open a fissure through which one can leave the Dragon-Quelling Tower," Qiu Yongsi explained between nervous gasps. "The jiao here want to escape their prison, so they're chasing after Hongjun and the chief. Hopefully nothing goes wrong."

Hongjun screamed as they plummeted through the array, lightning crackling around the tip of the riverscape brush. Li Jinglong clung tightly to his waist as they shot out of the pillar of light on the eighth level and hurtled into the portal on the seventh like twin shooting stars, pursued by hundreds of jiao.

"Look!" Li Jinglong called, glancing back at the swarm of jiao rapidly gaining on them.

"They're catching up!" Hongjun shouted.

"Don't be afraid!"

Within seconds, they were flying out of the portal on the seventh level, throwing up massive waves in their wake as they skimmed the surface of the ocean, the swarm of jiao hot on their heels.

The sixth level, the fifth level, the fourth level… The jiao drew closer with every level they traveled through until they arrived on the second, hurtling past the endless spine of snowy mountains like meteorites. When Hongjun dared to glance back, the jiao were no more than thirty feet away.

"Hold on tight!" Li Jinglong shouted as they arced through the air.

The snow-white peak beneath them was exactly the one Hongjun and Qiu Yongsi had first landed on when they were transported into the Dragon-Quelling Tower.

"Where's the next portal?!" Hongjun asked.

At that moment, the force propelling their flight vanished. They hung in the air briefly, then tumbled downward, into the abyss.

“Seriously?!” Li Jinglong cried. Though he knew that Ye Ming wouldn’t put them in danger, the feeling of free-falling through the sky was not one he would wish to describe.

As the horde of jiao sped after them, the riverscape brush Hongjun was holding erupted with a blinding glow. The flow of time around them warped and slowed; silence seemed to blanket their surroundings.

Hongjun opened his eyes and stared at Li Jinglong in shock as they plunged into the darkness, Li Jinglong’s arm secure around his waist. Seized by an irresistible impulse, Hongjun leaned forward to press a chaste kiss to Li Jinglong’s cheek.

Miles above the yawning abyss, both their hearts skipped a beat. Hongjun’s cheeks flushed pink. Here, beneath the boundless sky, there was neither heaven nor earth. Nothing existed save for the two of them, lovers who would follow each other through life and death.

Feeling flames of arousal kindle in him, Li Jinglong ran his tongue suggestively over his lips, drawing a laugh from Hongjun. Together, they tipped their heads up toward the spectacular sight above them. Hundreds of jiao streaked through the sky, shooting bolts of lightning, gouts of raging flame, and torrents of frigid ice while yellow sand danced in the wind. The elements of nature exploded in a riot of color like fireworks flickering into the darkness alongside them.

“I never dreamed…” Li Jinglong murmured, “I’d see a sight like this in all my life.”

Hongjun silently agreed. The light of the heart lamp bloomed in Li Jinglong’s palm, illuminating the abyss below their feet as the jiao drew nearer. As if they’d passed through some strange barrier, the flow of time accelerated again; suddenly, they were plummeting through the air at breakneck speed. With their own shrill screams echoing in their ears, they sank into the deepest recesses of the abyss.

Chapter 139:
Contrary to Their Wishes

IT WAS DARK around them when Hongjun splashed into a pool of freezing water. Panicked, he gasped, “I can’t swim…”

Li Jinglong put a strong arm around him. With a powerful kick, he cut through the water toward the edge of the pool.

The pained howls of jiao echoed from all directions as the water crashed over them. Li Jinglong immediately realized that this must be the Dragon-Corroding Pool that Xuan Ming had told them about.

The glowing sigil attached to the riverscape brush winked out. Realizing they had been tricked, the jiao who had followed them into the abyss screeched in rage. Even then, they dared not approach the pool. A fight broke out as the jiao sank their fangs into each other’s sides, lashing at one another in midair. As jiao blood began raining down, Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun’s wrist, clapping his other hand over Hongjun’s mouth as they dragged themselves out of the water. They crouched down and tiptoed away along the rocky edge of the pool.

Hongjun passed the riverscape brush to Li Jinglong, who tucked it into his lapels; they’d return it to Qiu Yongsi later.

When his eyes adjusted to the low light, Hongjun realized the darkness here wasn’t total. “Where are we? I thought these were rocks.”

An indistinct glow illuminated the abyss. They could now see that they were standing on an abandoned battlefield. The vast stretch of land was littered with weapons—halberds half sunk into the ground, surrounded by arrows and longbows, and even a few rusty swords.

Li Jinglong picked one up. The blade was so corroded it crumbled with a flick of his fingers. “There was a great battle here.”

Hongjun was baffled. “In Hang Prefecture? Who would fight *here*, of all places?”

“Someone must have moved the battlefield here with a spiritual technique. Didn’t you notice earlier? This transportation array is similar to the one Xie Yu used before.”

Hongjun picked up a massive arrow and studied its rusted tip. Li Jinglong looked over his shoulder. “This was used to kill jiao.”

Now Hongjun understood. On second glance, he could see it too: This was the remains of a battle between humans and jiao.

Li Jinglong led Hongjun toward the light in the distance. As they walked, veins appeared in the earth beneath their feet, emitting an azure glow.

“The earthly meridians!” Hongjun exclaimed. They’d seen them in Luoyang as well—the earthly meridians branching everywhere like blood vessels.

“Careful not to step on them,” Li Jinglong reminded him.

The energy flowing through the vessels pulsed brighter as they walked on. When they arrived where the light shone the brightest, a massive gate held up by stone pillars rose before them. They stopped in their tracks, gazing up at the gate standing in this desolate corner of the abyss. Beyond it, stone sculptures of ancient weapons—sabers, swords, axes, halberds, and dagger-axes—surrounded an altar.

Li Jinglong gave the altar no more than a passing glance. “Not here. Look—over there.”

He pointed to a dim column of light in the distance—likely the array that connected the abyss to the topmost level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower.

Something about this place felt strange. Coming around to the other side of the altar, Hongjun called, “Jinglong, wait. Come over here.”

He beckoned Li Jinglong over, and Li Jinglong obediently came to stand at his side. “Doesn’t this look like that symbol Di Renjie left in his notes? The uh…”

“The gate!” Li Jinglong blurted.

This stone structure was the exact same shape as one of the five symbols they’d puzzled over so long—the one that resembled a gate with

vertical lines running down the middle. Now they could see that those lines represented the stone weapons behind the gate.

Li Jinglong strode forward, studying the altar. Hongjun wiped the dust from its surface to reveal six symbols carved into the stone.

Alongside the eye, hill, moon, and river symbols they had seen before, there was a new symbol: a circle inscribed around wavy lines.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun fell into a contemplative silence.

“So this is where these symbols came from,” Hongjun muttered. “But who carved them here, I wonder?”

“I think we have a bigger concern—where’s the artifact?”

Hongjun had no answer to this.

A crack ran through the middle of the altar, as though a weapon had once been embedded there. Judging by the fine splintering around the crevice—the edges still fresh and sharp—the weapon had been wrenched out recently.

“Someone took it away not long ago,” Li Jinglong said. “Who do you think that might have been?”

Hongjun started in shock. “Xie Yu?”

Li Jinglong said with a wry smile, “Do you think this is good or bad news—that one of the artifacts is in Xie Yu’s hands?”

“No…” A thought flickered at the edge of Hongjun’s mind, giving him pause. He remembered what he’d glimpsed when he and Qiu Yongsi were flying to the third level on Xuan Ming’s back: a firefly gleam in the depths of the abyss. “I know where it is! Let’s go!”

Grasping Li Jinglong’s hand, Hongjun broke into a run toward the distant pillar of light. His heart was on the verge of leaping out of his chest. If he was right, what he’d seen must be a treasure nestled in the very heart of the abyss!

Realization dawned on Li Jinglong as he kept pace with Hongjun’s strides. “You’re guessing Xie Yu was able to destroy the array here because…”

“It’s not a guess,” Hongjun gasped. “I saw it myself!”

They came to a stop before a stretch of shallow water—they'd returned to the edge of the Dragon-Corroding Pool. A swarm of jiao drifted above them in the dark sky, giving the waters a wide berth. Hongjun rolled his pants legs up and waded into the pool with Li Jinglong, toward the colossal crater at its center. The inside of the crater was dry; carved into its flat bottom was a vast spiritual array, which—just as Ye Ming had said—consisted of two rings, slightly askew from their original positions. The circuits of energy inside these rings were formed by multiple sigils, which drew their power straight from the earthly meridians. But where they should have glowed with a steady light, they were now blinking erratically, their flow of energy obstructed.

Embedded around the perimeter of the array was a device that resembled a thick length of rope glimmering with fluctuating bursts of light. Evidently, Xie Yu had destroyed this section of the array with this device, then knocked the rings out of place before leaving it here.

"The Yao-Binding Cord!" Li Jinglong exclaimed.

All thought of repairing the array flew to the backs of their minds as they leapt down into the crater. Hongjun was already reaching for the artifact when Li Jinglong stopped him. "Wait!"

The Yao-Binding Cord—seemingly woven from some kind of metal—was securely embedded in the stone. It had become one with the array, drawing its power from the earthly meridians. The energy guarding it was much fiercer and more volatile than what they'd seen underground in Luoyang. The instant they approached, the cord sent bolts of electricity crackling toward them.

"I can't touch it, but you can," Hongjun said. "We just need to try!"

To his surprise, Li Jinglong suddenly seemed nervous. "I…I don't know. Duke Di didn't say anything about how to get the artifacts!"

"The Sword of Wisdom already acknowledged you," Hongjun said. "Just do it!"

Li Jinglong collected himself and met Hongjun's gaze. Hongjun nodded in encouragement. Warily, Li Jinglong stepped forward.

Pentacolor sacred light bloomed in Hongjun's palm as he readied himself to help Li Jinglong counter any energy burst. After a fraught

silence, Li Jinglong took a deep breath and dropped down on one knee, reaching toward the Yao-Binding Cord.

“I pray to the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha: Please bestow upon me this artifact,” Li Jinglong intoned. He reached out and set his hand on the Yao-Binding Cord.

Instantly, the energy within the earthly meridians surged up his arm. Li Jinglong screamed in pain as his soul was thrown from his body. It hovered behind him, enveloped in a blue glow.

“Jinglong!” Hongjun cried. “Hang on!”

Flashes of electricity sizzled around Li Jinglong as his body faded until it was incorporeal. Gritting his teeth, he tugged at the Yao-Binding Cord, but it didn’t budge. Undeterred, he yanked harder. The rope emitted a burst of golden light, sending him flying backward.

Hongjun dove to catch him, and they tumbled to the ground. Li Jinglong’s arm was shaking uncontrollably. He sucked down a shuddering breath, his eyes huge with shock and terror.

“What happened?!” Hongjun asked in disbelief.

“Let me try again,” Li Jinglong muttered to himself.

“Wait, no!”

Li Jinglong rose shakily to his feet. He hadn’t expected the Yao-Binding Cord to repel him—but he wasn’t ready to admit defeat. Nerving himself, he lunged forward and seized the rope again.

“Just give it to me!” Li Jinglong bit out as he tugged doggedly on it. “What the hell do you want from me?!”

“Let go!” Hongjun yelled.

The energy coursing through the earthly meridians was searing Li Jinglong’s soul. If this went on much longer, he’d die.

Once again, the Yao-Binding Cord exploded in golden light, throwing Li Jinglong backward. He landed with a harsh *thud*. In the ensuing silence, Li Jinglong turned to meet Hongjun’s gaze, chest heaving.

Never had Hongjun seen such turbulent emotions in Li Jinglong’s eyes.

“It won’t acknowledge me as its master,” he bit out.

“That’s…that’s not possible,” Hongjun said. “Maybe it’s because of the earthly meridians here?”

“This artifact of Acalanatha… It doesn’t acknowledge me,” Li Jinglong repeated.

“But why?” Hongjun frowned. “Let’s think. Maybe we can figure out what went wrong!”

After an extended silence, Li Jinglong said, “There’s no point. The Sword of Wisdom is the same—it’s never viewed me as its master. In my hands, it’s always been nothing but an ordinary weapon.”

Hongjun gaped in disbelief. “What?!”

Li Jinglong met his gaze again, confusion and helplessness swimming in his eyes.

“But you can summon gods!” Hongjun exclaimed.

“That’s only thanks to the heart lamp,” Li Jinglong answered. “When I wield the Sword of Wisdom, I just infuse the sword with its power. The heart lamp is my sole source of spiritual power when I exorcise yao and vanquish demons—Acalanatha has never given me his blessing.”

“No… No way!” Hongjun stuttered. “That’s ridiculous! Let me think… You once conjured a set of armor…”

“That was Dipamkara’s armor,” Li Jinglong replied. “If I held both the powers of the heart lamp and the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha like we thought, the Sword of Wisdom would surely be more than an ordinary weapon—but look.”

Li Jinglong drew his blade and held it in front of Hongjun.

Now that Hongjun thought about it, the Sword of Wisdom had never been much help to Li Jinglong against a powerful enemy, whether it was the nine-tailed celestial fox, the ghost king, or Xie Yu. Rather than exhibiting any of the power one might expect of an artifact of Acalanatha, it had always been merely a medium through which Li Jinglong channeled the heart lamp’s light.

He looked up at Li Jinglong helplessly. “But then…what do we do now?”

Li Jinglong shrugged, a bitter smile on his face.

Despite having wielded the Sword of Wisdom for years and now leading the Department of Exorcism, Li Jinglong had never been acknowledged by Acalanatha and couldn’t harness his artifacts. The idea seemed absurd—but after a bit of thought, Hongjun realized it made sense. If Li Jinglong could truly channel the power of both the heart lamp and Acalanatha, Hongjun would have sensed more spiritual power in Li Jinglong’s meridians from the very beginning.

This revelation turned everything on its head. As he held Li Jinglong’s gaze, Hongjun sensed a familiar unease in him.

“You already knew,” Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong nodded in resignation. “I was just lying to myself, wasn’t I?”

“Then…” Hongjun paused. “You…didn’t actually inherit Acalanatha’s powers.”

“Correct.”

“But you have the heart lamp. We can be sure of that.”

“We can.”

“Well, that’s enough, then,” Hongjun said. “One person can’t take everything good in the world for himself, right? That’d be greedy.”

Li Jinglong couldn’t help but laugh. Hongjun scooted over to sit across from him, a confession on his lips: “To be honest, I like Dipamkara more than Acalanatha anyway.”

“You don’t have to say that,” Li Jinglong said, amused and touched.

“I mean it!”

It was true that Hongjun disliked Acalanatha. The vision he’d seen of his younger self consumed by golden flames had instilled an innate fear of the Sword of Wisdom in him.

“But we still have to extricate the cord,” Li Jinglong said. “Or we can’t repair the array. Let me try again.”

Li Jinglong took a deep breath, bracing himself. Hongjun held up a hand. “I’ll do it.”

Before Li Jinglong could protest, he continued, “I have the pentacolor sacred light to protect me. I’ll be fine. We’ll retrieve the Yao-Binding Cord and take it back with us. Then we can take our time thinking about what to do next.” Noting Li Jinglong’s anxious expression, he hurried to add, “I’ll let go if it becomes too much, don’t worry!”

This time, it was Hongjun who approached the array. Erecting a barrier of sacred light, he reached out toward the earthly meridians. The energy flowing through them rushed toward Hongjun with a deep thrum, only to flow around the glowing shield, streaming down the dome of sacred light like water.

“Careful!” Li Jinglong fretted from the side.

Hongjun prodded the Yao-Binding Cord with a finger. Nothing happened.

“See? I’m fine,” he assured Li Jinglong. He reached out to pull the rope toward him.

The moment he put his hands on the cord, his meridians were assaulted by a force so violent it felt like a hole had been blasted through them. Golden light flashed, and he was catapulted through the air—the Yao-Binding Cord held tight in his hands.

“Hongjun!” shouted Li Jinglong as he raced over and scooped Hongjun into his arms.

“Here you go,” Hongjun murmured weakly, placing the Yao-Binding Cord in Li Jinglong’s stunned hands before struggling to his feet. “Are we done here?”

Li Jinglong nodded wordlessly.

“Do we still have to collect the remaining four artifacts once we get out?”

Li Jinglong pondered before answering. Somewhat helplessly, he said, “Yes—and we also have to find the right person to whom we can entrust all six artifacts.”

He had always been a brave and tenacious person, but it was still difficult for him to recover from the blow this had dealt to his pride. At his core, however, he was someone who was quick to put setbacks behind him. No matter how much he resented it, the artifacts weren't his to begin with and would never belong to him. Hongjun's earnest words had helped him come to terms with the truth.

"Let's fix the array," he said.

Hongjun unfurled a parchment scroll Qiu Yongsi had given them before they set out, which detailed the correct flow of energy within the array. He glanced up at Li Jinglong, whose brow remained furrowed. He still appeared lost.

Hongjun smiled. "I really do think everything is fine as it is."

"Okay, I get it," Li Jinglong said, exasperated. "If I'm not the heir to the powers of Acalanatha, then so be it. Life goes on. I'll get over it—I just need a little time."

They stepped up to the edge of the array, where they stood together, looking up at the dark sky. Li Jinglong directed Hongjun to stand in the inner ring while he stood just outside it, between the inner and outer circles.

"Here we go," he said.

They both raised their arms, unleashing their spiritual power. The heart lamp's white light enveloped Li Jinglong and fused with the earthly meridians, while the jade-green peacock feather fastened to Hongjun's waist glowed brightly. His pentacolor sacred light emitted a radiance like colored glass, sparkling with tens of thousands of luminous beams that merged with the energy flowing through the blue vessels snaking across the ground.

"Take note of where I'm facing as I turn," Li Jinglong reminded Hongjun.

Standing in the inner circle, facing the pillar of light, Hongjun glanced at Li Jinglong, who stood outside its bounds, his long hair flying in the wind. Illuminated by the abundant energies of the earthly meridians, he was the picture of a heavenly general, mighty and divine. A thought flitted through Hongjun's mind: What if the artifacts of Acalanatha refused to

acknowledge Li Jinglong as their master because he already had the heart lamp in his soul?

With a deafening rumble, the outer ring began to rotate on the ground. Arms outstretched, Hongjun closed his eyes, directing the wayward streams of energy back where they belonged.

The inner ring joined the outer, picking up speed, and the wild, thrashing bursts of energy gradually calmed. As thunderous noises reverberated all around them, they had the bizarre feeling that the entire abyss was shifting on a great axis.

The pagoda on the ninth level had collapsed, and the dragon kings were gone. Qiu Yongsi and Ashina Adarvan stood alone on the platform floating in midair as the world around them began to spin.

"They're realigning the portals," Qiu Yongsi said. "Cover me!"

"Where are these attacks supposed to come from?" Ashina Adarvan asked, scanning the sky. The jiao had all scattered, leaving the ninth level empty.

"Everywhere—you'll see," Qiu Yongsi replied. "I'm starting now!"

He floated up above the platform, forming a hand seal as he began to chant an incantation. He traced a finger through the air, and azure sigils appeared one after another, dispersing into the sky almost the moment they came into existence.

A majestic roar reverberated in their ears—Ye Ming's ashes had merged with his soul. Ye Ming, in his dragon form, circled the platform as an array expanded around Qiu Yongsi, sparking with energy.

Time slowed bizarrely, and with it, Ashina Adarvan's protestations. "*Wait*—what—the—hell—is—this? Qiu—Yong—si—! Ex—*plain*—!"

The sky above their heads cracked open. Shafts of blinding light speared through countless fissures, and the gleaming spirits of thousands of jiao came into view, swarming toward the array.

Ashina Adarvan gaped in shock. Grasping for his spiritual energy, he summoned a manifestation of Verethragna, the Zoroastrian god of war. The god's fiery whips materialized in his hands—somersaulting through the air,

he brought them ripping down on the horde of enemies flocking toward Qiu Yongsi, sending the jiao spirits careening away from the platform.

The ninth level was flooded with jiao spirits. They had been unable to approach the pagoda until the moment Ye Ming's ashes and soul fused, changing the laws that governed the Dragon-Quelling Tower. Liberated at last, the spirits of dead jiao attacked the array in a series of lightning strikes.

Ashina Adarvan guarded the array with all his might, whips flying. The flow of time fluctuated erratically, accelerating to impossible speeds before reverting to normal, then slowing to an excruciating crawl. He had no way of knowing how fast his whips would lash through the air from moment to moment, but there was no choice but to keep going.

"Can you hurry up?!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"I'm trying!" Qiu Yongsi shouted back. "Stop yelling! I have to focus!"

Chapter 140:
The An Lushan Rebellion

DOWN IN THE ABYSS, Hongjun and Li Jinglong felt their entire world spin. The array beneath their feet began to whirl, ground and all, under some miraculous force, sending both of them spiraling into the distance. The mountains rumbled and the oceans roiled as the portals on every level of the Dragon-Quelling Tower began shifting back into their original positions.

Hongjun turned his gaze to Li Jinglong. “How do we get back up to the top of the tower?!”

“No idea!” Li Jinglong replied. “I’m sure Yongsi won’t leave us here to rot—focus!”

The moment Li Jinglong moved to stand behind Hongjun, the inner and outer arrays finally realigned, the sigils in both circles falling back in their correct positions. Whenever a pulse of energy rushed toward Hongjun, he poured it back into the earthly meridians. At last, the array began to shine brightly. They stood in the dead center of the Dragon-Corroding Pool as countless jiao swooped down to bombard the array. The waters of the pool swelled in response, attacking any who dared come too close.

The stars shifted as time raced by outside the tower.

Winter ended, and spring came. Mergen and Lu Xu left You Prefecture and rushed back to Chang’an to report to Li Heng. The situation in You Prefecture was dire; the crown prince would need to take urgent military action. At the same moment, in Pengze, A-Tai and Turandokht ventured into the bowels of the Taihu Aqueduct below Poyang Lake, where they discovered a primordial altar.

Time swept past. In the sixth month of the fourteenth year of Tianbao, Mergen and Lu Xu joined A-Tai and Turandokht as they returned to West Lake with a special envoy from the crown prince. They arrived just in time to see a blinding beam of light shoot out from the Dragon-Quelling

Tower, piercing the clouds. It blazed for nine days and nine nights, but their companions from the Department of Exorcism still did not emerge.

The envoy Li Longji sent to You Prefecture with orders to summon An Lushan back to the imperial court was executed by the governor's own hand.

On the seventeenth day of the ninth month, the Department of Exorcism rode back to Chang'an, and a recovered Yang Guozhong returned to court.

On the twenty-third day of the tenth month, An Lushan, the military governor of You Prefecture, declared Yang Guozhong a traitor. He claimed evil monsters had infiltrated the imperial court and taken control of the emperor. His allies included the Tiele, Kumo Xi, Khitan, and Shiwei tribes.

Within the abyss, the array had been restored. Li Jinglong strode toward Hongjun and took his hand, and together they looked up toward the sky.

And at the topmost level of the tower, Ashina Adarvan yelled, "You're telling me there's more?!"

He'd long exhausted his arsenal. Verethragna's fiery wings fanned out behind him, encircling both Qiu Yongsi and the array, but the flaming pinions were frayed and tattered after weathering the relentless attacks from all sides.

"Step back!" Qiu Yongsi called.

The moment Ashina Adarvan folded Verethragna's wings, Qiu Yongsi soared upward, leaving the platform behind. Making a sharp turn, he sent talismans crackling with lightning shooting in all directions to the sound of Ye Ming's earthshaking roars.

Ye Ming uttered a long call as he shot high into the sky, then dropped, crashing headfirst into the center of the platform. Qiu Yongsi lunged for Ashina Adarvan and gripped his wrist as they rolled away from the carnage. Ashina Adarvan grabbed hold of the crumbling stone rim of the platform just before they slid off the edge.

The dragon kings roared on the levels below them, their voices shaking the tower as the portals locked into alignment. Ye Ming dove down the axis of the tower, gleaming with light as he hurtled past the eighth level. Shimmering dust billowed from his body, trailing like a comet's tail in his wake as the divine dragon plummeted toward the bottom. In less than a breath, he'd reached the seventh level, where the corona of dust around him scattered gently through the air.

The sixth level, the fifth—Ye Ming barreled through the portals, one after another, and his ashes dispersed through the sky, imbuing every level of the tower with his mighty temporal powers. The shimmering dust coalesced into a swirling river of stars that linked them all together.

At last, he reached the second level—then, the abyss.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun gripped each other's hands as the dragon's roars grew louder in their ears. In a flash, Ye Ming was before them, his serpentine body aglow with a radiance that illuminated every darkened corner of the abyss.

"Go!" he roared.

Light flashed in front of Hongjun's eyes. He grabbed Li Jinglong, and they clung together in a fierce embrace as a hurricane of energy rose from the ground, propelling them up to the second level.

The portal into the abyss vanished with a resonant thrum.

On the ninth day of the eleventh month, An Lushan began his march westward, claiming that serious peril had befallen the nation. Joined by his many allies, he marched at the head of a massive army two hundred thousand strong. Multiple prefectures and counties in the Hebei Circuit surrendered without a fight.

In a stark contrast to the threat bearing down on them, music filled the chambers of Huaqing Palace atop Mount Li as its occupants whiled away their days in inebriated merriment.

Feng Changqing was among the first to receive the military dispatch about the uprising. He went straight to Huaqing Palace. And with that, the upheaval that would usher in a civil war from which Great Tang would

never recover—a time that would later be recorded as the An Lushan rebellion—began.

Hongjun would have been flung out of the portal when they reached the third level had not Li Jinglong grabbed his wrist in the nick of time. The pillar of light on the second level dimmed behind them, a process that repeated with each level they traversed as they rose higher and higher, past swirling galaxies of stars.

At last, the portal spat them out onto the ninth level. Hongjun squawked as he crashed to the ground, landing hard on Li Jinglong's chest. Li Jinglong wheezed in pain as his ribs nearly shattered from the impact. For several moments, he lay there, unable to get up.

All the portals had returned to their original positions. Qiu Yongsi gazed up at the hollow sky, a vast dome above the square earth upon which he stood. Adorned with a swirling river of stars, it was a magnificent sight to behold, like an exquisite model of the celestial sphere.

Ye Ming's voice echoed from deep in the abyss. "*I bid you all farewell*."

With a thunderous rumble, the darkness of the abyss swallowed him; there the divine dragon would remain forever.

The thorny vines and brambles crisscrossing the ground below them retreated as brick and stone soared through the air, coming together to rebuild the nine-tiered pagoda. Standing tall once more, it radiated a multicolored brilliance under the stars.

The four exorcists lay on the ground at its foot, gazing up at the star-spangled heavens as they all breathed sighs of exhaustion.

"It's so beautiful," Hongjun murmured. This place had been wild and forbidding before, but now it was breathtaking, an ethereal paradise.

"Let's get going! Everything else can wait till we're out of this tower!" Li Jinglong flipped himself to his feet—they had no time to waste.

Qiu Yongsi was still trying to catch his breath. "Give me a moment. I need a break."

“There’s no time to lose,” Li Jinglong said. “Who knows what’s going on outside right now. You can rest when we’re out.”

Qiu Yongsi forced himself to his feet. “Go up to the roof, then—we’ll leave from there.”

“Finally!” Ashina Adarvan piped up. “I need a drink.”

Thank heavens, I really don’t want to stay in this prison any longer, Hongjun thought. “How much time has passed?”

“Seven days here in the tower,” Ashina Adarvan replied, checking the cosmic wheel.

“The flow of time was disrupted when we restored the time barrier. It’s possible more time has passed out there than we think,” Qiu Yongsi said.

“Hurry up and get us out of here,” Li Jinglong commanded.

“What if it’s winter when we come out?” Qiu Yongsi complained. “I didn’t bring any warm clothes…”

“Do it *now*!” the three of them roared. “Stop dawdling!”

Only then did Qiu Yongsi trudge with them back to the top of the pagoda, mustering the last of his strength to perform a spiritual technique that enveloped them in a blue glow.

Outside the Dragon-Quelling Tower, a column of blue light shot into the sky with a low hum.

They emerged on the seventh day of the twelfth month, fourteenth year of Tianbao. A chilly gust of wind scattered powdery flecks of snow over the exorcists as they reappeared behind Cloud Villa at last.

“It really *is* winter!” Hongjun exclaimed. “It’s been six months!”

Qiu Qiu strolled over to them. “More like a year and a half.”

“Grandpa!” Qiu Yongsi called out. “You’re still alive!”

Everyone stared.

Li Jinglong looked around. “Didn’t we agree to meet back here in a year? Where is everyone?”

“Do you want the news now or later, Marquis?” Qiu Qiu asked.

Exhausted, Li Jinglong sank down on the steps before the array platform. “Let’s have the good news first, Qiu-lao.”[16]

“There is no good news—only bad,” Qiu Qiu said. Li Jinglong raised his head to look at him. “An Lushan has rebelled against the throne.”

The war drums in far-off Yuyang shook the earth, drowning out the song and dance in the palace.[17]

Two hours had passed since the exorcists emerged from the tower. They had all taken much-needed baths. Qiu Yongsi, who had completely exhausted his spiritual power, was already asleep in his room.

Ashina Adarvan toweled his hair dry as he joined Li Jinglong and Hongjun in poring over the numerous letters spread over the table. They were all emergency missives from the members of the Department of Exorcism, sent from all over the nation. The letters dated from the seventh month of the previous year to the end of last month, chronicling the ever-changing situation in the north.

“Seventeen months,” Li Jinglong murmured. “I never thought An Lushan would risk everything on a move like this.”

“The entire Hebei Circuit has surrendered to him,” Qiu Qiu said, stroking his beard. “So far, An Lushan’s army includes only men from Great Tang and his northern allies—no yao have fought in this war.”

“Very shrewd of him,” Li Jinglong said.

If yao appeared on the battlefield, the exorcists would have to get involved. An Lushan and his yao allies had remained in the rear, deploying mortal generals to lead their army against Great Tang. The foreign clans from the north had also joined the fray, but as long as there were no yao, the exorcists were oath-bound to stay out of the conflict; Mergen couldn’t transform into the gray wolf and tear through a mortal army, nor could A-Tai bombard the enemy troops with blasts from his cyclone fan.

“Let me look at the map,” Li Jinglong said.

A steward spread the map open on the desk. Peering down at it, Hongjun suggested, “What if we detoured around the army and fought An Lushan in the rear, where he’s hiding?”

“We shouldn’t rush this,” Li Jinglong said. “It hasn’t even been a month since he rebelled. His manpower and resources are still plentiful. Wherever he is, he’ll be heavily guarded, so sneaking behind enemy lines now isn’t the best choice. We should head to Luoyang and meet up with the others before we make any decision.”

“Thank you for your hard work,” Qiu Qiu said. “You’ve only just exited the tower, and now you’re off again.”

Li Jinglong sighed. Mouth twisting in a wry smile, he said, “Such is my destiny—to work hard my whole life. What else can I do but move forward?”

Opening the transportation array had drained Qiu Yongsi completely; he had no choice but to stay and convalesce. Li Jinglong visited him before they left.

He’d had no idea that Qiu Yongsi would be so severely weakened. He was about to apologize for forcing him to continue when Qiu Yongsi stopped him. “You made the right call. It’s fortunate that we left when we did. If we’d stayed there even half a day longer, Luoyang might have been lost by the time we came out.”

“Stay home and rest,” Li Jinglong said. Now that he thought about it, Qiu Yongsi’s true mission was to defeat Xie Yu. Yang Guozhong had returned to Chang’an, and the situation was yet unclear. It was critical that Qiu Yongsi regained his energy for whatever might come next.

“I’ll join you in Guanzhong once I’m a bit better,” Qiu Yongsi said.

Qiu Qiu had a boat prepared that very night to ferry the exorcists northward. Only once they were aboard did they breathe a sigh of relief and take their rest for the night.

As they sailed, Hongjun read the letters one by one. Some of the missives sent from Mergen’s group were written by Lu Xu. As he read them, the image of Mergen teaching Lu Xu to write appeared unbidden in his mind. Although only seven days had passed for Hongjun, he missed his friends dearly. More time had passed for A-Tai, Lu Xu, and the others. He was sure they felt the separation more keenly.

It was quiet now, in the dead of night. Hongjun slumped over the desk, watching Li Jinglong read every letter carefully. “Are we going to

war?”

“No,” Li Jinglong replied. “We’re exorcists—we deal with yao and demons. We can’t fight in a war unless An Lushan deploys yao against humans.”

“Why not?” Hongjun asked. “Did Di Renjie make this rule?”

“He did.” Li Jinglong sighed. “The divine kun reminded me of this too: If we exorcists join a mortal war, it will turn into a massacre. We risk breaking the laws of heaven if we do that. All things have their fate; this cannot be tampered with.”

Hongjun nodded. Li Jinglong continued, “Mergen wrote that we have a spy among An Lushan’s ranks—albeit one who can’t fully be trusted. Who do you think that might be?”

Coming up blank, Hongjun shook his head with a frown.

Mergen hadn’t mentioned this spy’s name, but Li Jinglong figured it was likely the carp yao Zhao Zilong. Still, he couldn’t be certain—he sensed Mergen had omitted the name as a reminder not to be overly confident that a spy could win them the war. He mentally set the matter aside.

Hongjun yawned.

“You should go to bed,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll work a while longer.”

“Mm.” Hongjun gazed up at Li Jinglong with a sleepy smile. He thought back to their journey to Dunhuang, when they’d stopped in the capital of Liang Prefecture. Li Jinglong had written letters every night while the winds howled outside; even then, he’d always told Hongjun to go to bed first.

“I’ll stay up with you,” Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong stroked his hair. It wasn’t long before Hongjun lost in his battle against his drowsiness; the week they’d spent inside the Dragon-Quelling Tower had drained him. Within minutes, he was snoring softly at the desk.

The biting winds of winter haunted the canal like a swarm of ghosts, hissing as they raked past the ship.

Li Jinglong carried the sleeping Hongjun to bed and bent to drop a gentle kiss on his lips. He settled on the floor beside the bed and opened a book detailing the mountains and valleys of the Luoyang region, glancing at it now and then as he flipped through military dispatches.

The general Guo Ziyi had been swiftly appointed as the military governor of Shuofang, where he marshaled the local troops and prepared to march eastward to meet An Lushan in battle. Li Longji had also recommissioned Feng Changqing as the military governor of Fanyang, replacing the rebellious An Lushan. Li Jinglong's cousin was now mobilizing troops in Chang'an and Luoyang. Meanwhile, Geshu Han was assembling his own forces in Liang Prefecture. In order to prepare the region against a flanking maneuver by the Göktürks, he had deployed additional troops in its defense.

If Li Jinglong had to predict the outcome of this war, he'd wager that Feng Changqing and Guo Ziyi combined could hold their own against An Lushan. Feng Changqing himself had sent Li Jinglong a letter requesting that he come straight to Luoyang and warning him against any thoughts he might have of taking the sea route to ambush An Lushan in You Prefecture. If An Lushan dared to launch a rebellion, he must have already guarded against such a threat; he was no doubt waiting for Li Jinglong to fall into his trap.

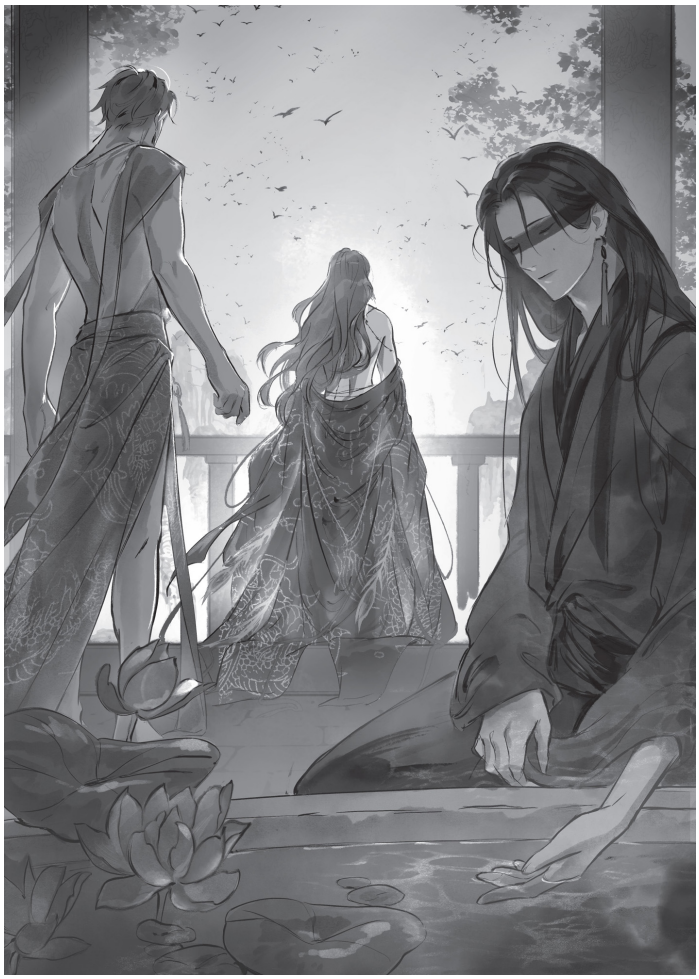
The general on the front lines leading the rebel army was An Lushan's childhood friend Shi Siming—a man who was surely no match for veterans like Guo Ziyi and Feng Changqing. An Lushan couldn't hide in the rear forever; he would have to show his face eventually. The exorcists' best chance to ambush him would present itself when he left Fanyang and headed south.

Li Jinglong had thought the six artifacts of Acalanatha would be the aid they needed in this battle, but the artifacts refused to acknowledge him as their master. He couldn't say this wasn't discouraging—but he still had the heart lamp. Just as the Department of Exorcism had defeated Xie Yu that night at Daming Palace, it should be possible to purify the demonic energy in An Lushan with the heart lamp, as long as they set the right trap.

As Hongjun slumbered on, Li Jinglong drew the Yao-Binding Cord from his travel pack and spread the shimmering length of rope on the table,

lost in thought.

Night painted the sky black as a flock of birds winged toward a lone peak in the Taihang Mountains. The summit was teeming with birds, leaving no space untouched. They perched on the roofs of Yaojin Palace, thronging its corridors and filling the branches of the trees in the forests around it. Even more wheeled overhead in the sky, soaring toward greater heights.



Chong Ming stood on the hall's dais and cast his gaze toward the far-off eastern horizon.

Qing Xiong slowly approached from behind. "This is all I can summon."

"It's far from enough," Chong Ming said coldly.

The divine kun sat on the edge of the pool, his hand submerged in its icy waters. He murmured, "They must have exited the Dragon-Quelling Tower by now. Li Jinglong should be traveling north to Luoyang as we speak."

"We're relying on *him*?" Chong Ming asked, his voice laced with derision.

"An ordinary man may be our best chance of conquering fate," Qing Xiong answered.

"I refuse to pin my hopes on a mere mortal," Chong Ming snapped. "The time has almost come. I presume you can see the future at hand, Divine Kun."

"I see slaughter, blood, and demonic energy," the divine kun said. He sighed deeply. "You're right, Chong Ming. Everything we're doing now is merely a foolish attempt to deceive ourselves. Fate cannot be changed. We are still headed toward our predestined calamity."

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Legend of Exorcism

VOLUME 6

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Legend of Exorcism is set during the Tianbao era (AD 742–756), the third regnal period of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. The Tianbao era saw the decline of the Tang dynasty, commonly regarded as the pinnacle of imperial Chinese civilization.

Many of the characters who appear in *Legend of Exorcism* are fictionalized versions of real historical figures contemporary to the setting, including Emperor Xuanzong himself, Li Longji, as well as Noble Consort Yang Yuhuan and Right Chancellor Yang Guozhong. The main members of the Department of Exorcism are fully fictional, though some of their family members are real historical figures.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

KONG HONGJUN 孔鸿俊: A half-yao boy from Yaojin Palace who is sent on a mission to expel the yao king of Chang'an.

LI JINGLONG 李景珑: Formerly a commandant of the Longwu Guard, an ordinary mortal who becomes the chief of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEMONIC EXORCISM

ZHAO ZILONG 赵子龙: A carp yao and Hongjun's closest companion.

MERGEN 莫日根: A Shiwei tribesman with the ability to transform into a gray wolf.

TIGRA YAZDEGERD 泰格拉 á 伊思艾 (A-TAI 阿泰): A Persian prince and last surviving descendant of the House of Sasan, as well as a disciple of

Persian Zoroastrianism.

QIU YONGSI 裘永思: A Jiangnan scholar from West Lake sent to Chang'an to build his courage.

LU XU 陆许: A young scout from the border regions with the ability to transform into a white deer.

ASHINA ADARVAN 阿史那琼: A-Tai's friend and loyal follower.

TURANDOKHT 特兰朵: A-Tai's fiancée.

YAOJIN PALACE

CHONG MING 重明: Leader of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's adoptive father; a phoenix.

QING XIONG 青雄: One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace; a peng.

KONG XUAN 孔宣: One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's birth father; a peacock.

CHANG'AN

HANGUO LAN 翰国兰: Merchant from the Western Regions and the leader of the Merchants' Guild in Chang'an.

DI RENJIE 狄仁杰: Statesman and founder of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism (deceased).

THE DUCHESS OF GUO 虢国夫人: Yang Yuhuan's elder sister.

EMPEROR XUANZONG 唐玄宗 (LI LONGJI 李隆基): The reigning emperor of Great Tang.

FENG CHANGQING 封常清: A general of Great Tang and Li Jinglong's elder cousin.

GAO LISHI 高力士: Chief Eunuch.

HU SHENG 胡升: Captain of the Longwu Guard and Li Jinglong's former superior.

HUANG YONG 黄庸: Deputy Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review.

LI HENG 李亨: The crown prince of Great Tang.

YANG GUOZHONG 杨国忠: Right Chancellor and Yang Yuhuan's cousin.

YANG YUHUAN 杨玉环: Beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong, also known as Noble Consort Yang.

LIANG PREFECTURE

GESHU HAN 哥舒翰: The military governor of Hexi and Duke of Liang.

LIU FEI 刘非: The king of the fallen corpse ghosts.

CLOUD VILLA

LI SHUNYING 李舜英: Qiu Yongsi's birth mother. A reincarnation of Yaoji (瑶姬).

QIU QIU 裘虬: Qiu Yongsi's grandfather.

DRAGON-QUELLING TOWER

FEI LIAN 飞廉: Dragon King of Wind.

FENG KUI 风夔: Dragon King of Thunder.

SHU HAI 竖亥: Dragon King of Poison.

XUAN MING 玄冥: Dragon King of Ice.

YE MING 噎鸣: Dragon of Time.

YING HUO 荧惑: Dragon King of Fire.

OTHER

AN LUSHAN 安禄山: The military governor of Hedong and Fanyang.

JIA YUZE 贾毓泽: Hongjun’s late mother.

JIA ZHOU 贾洲: Hongjun’s maternal uncle, the governor of Gua Prefecture.

LI BAI 李白: Courtesy name Taibai. Famous poet and friend of Li Jinglong.

XIE YU 獬狱: A black jiao who escaped from the Dragon-Quelling Tower, formerly thought to be the yao king of Chang’an.

YUAN KUN 袁昆: A yao known as the divine kun and a friend of Qing Xiong.

Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

-LAO: A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.

-SHI: A suffix attached to the surname of a woman to denote her maiden name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

DIMEI 弟妹: A colloquial way to refer to one’s younger brother’s wife.

ERGE: A word meaning “second brother.”

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIUJIU: A word meaning “maternal uncle.”

MEI/MEIMEI: A word meaning “little sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

SAOZI: A word meaning “elder brother’s wife.” It can also be used to address the wife of an unrelated male peer.

Other

SHIFU: A word for “master” or “teacher.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Glossary

DRAGONS: The long (龙 / “dragon”), or zhenlong (真龙 / “true dragon”), is a legendary creature that features prominently in Chinese mythology. Commonly depicted as a horned, snakelike creature with four legs, it is an auspicious symbol of the divine and historically associated with the emperor and imperial power.

According to one myth, the jiao (蛟) or jiaolong (蛟龙 / “flood dragon”), a variety of hornless aquatic dragon, can transform into a “true” dragon by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

According to another, a carp can transform into a dragon if it swims upstream against the current and leaps over the falls of the Yellow River at the Dragon Gate.

The five-clawed dragon is a symbol of the emperor and for his use only.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS: Also known as bagua (八卦), the eight trigrams are a Daoist figure consisting of eight symbols arranged in an octagon that surrounds the taijitu, or yin-yang symbol. It is the Daoist representation of all things in the universe. The eight trigrams each correspond to one of eight elements, which include the sky, fire, thunder, wind, water, the marsh, the mountains, and the earth.

GU: A venom-based poison traditionally prepared by sealing several venomous creatures such as centipedes, snakes, and scorpions inside a closed container, where they devoured one another and allegedly concentrated their toxins into a single survivor.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with rank one being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was one path to

becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls that represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms that remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but Daoism commonly features three hun and seven po.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians, similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing. The appearance of the acupuncture points can also indicate a person's health; for example, darkness of the Yintang point between the brows portends an ill fate or even death.

YAO/YAOGUAI: Living creatures and inorganic objects that have gained higher consciousness through absorbing the energy of the natural world and years of spiritual cultivation. Yao who have attained sufficiently high levels of cultivation can assume human form.

YIN AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 114: Inevitable Decline

[1] Refers to a historical anecdote in which emperor Li Longji asked Yang Guozhong and Gao Lishi to attend to Li Bai when the poet served in the Tang imperial court. Furious and humiliated, Gao Lishi subsequently convinced Noble Consort Yang to take offense at Li Bai's poetic depiction of her, which led to Li Bai's dismissal from the imperial court.

Chapter 117: Like a Dream

[2] Lines from the Eleven-Faced Avalokitesvara Heart Dharani Sutra.

[3] Lines from The Diamond Sutra.

Chapter 120: The Monochrome Hourglass

[4] Referencing the text of Shizi, reconstructed during the Ming and Qing dynasties from fragments attributed to fourth century BC scholar Shi Liao.

Chapter 122: Broken Promises

[5] Lines from the poem "A Farewell to Meng Haoran at Yellow Crane Tower as He Departs for Guangling" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[6] Lines from the first of "Three Poems Set to the Song of Tranquility" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 123: Imminent Calamity

[7] Lines from the first of "Three Quatrains Written as I Pass by Huaqing Palace" by Tang dynasty poet Du Mu.

Chapter 126: Cloud Villa by West Lake

[8] Lines from “Moored by the Maple Bridge at Nightfall” by Tang dynasty poet Zhang Ji.

[9] Otherwise known as Emperor Wu of Han, considered one of the greatest emperors of the Han dynasty.

Chapter 127: A Stunning Revelation

[10] The name of a minor goddess associated with medicine and the Wushan region in Hubei.

[11] Lines from “The Wide Han” in the section “Odes of Zhou and the South” in the Classic of Poetry. Qiu Yongsi’s given name is taken from the phrase “no one can swim its breadth” (bu ke yong si), though Yongsi’s name uses different characters.

Chapter 129: Entering the Tower

[12] One mu is approximately eight hundred square yards.

[13] One qing is equal to one hundred mu, or approximately sixteen acres.

Chapter 135: A Flash of Inspiration

[14] Wu, Jia, and Ding are three of the ten heavenly stems, a system of ordinals indigenous to China. They correspond to five, one, and four respectively.

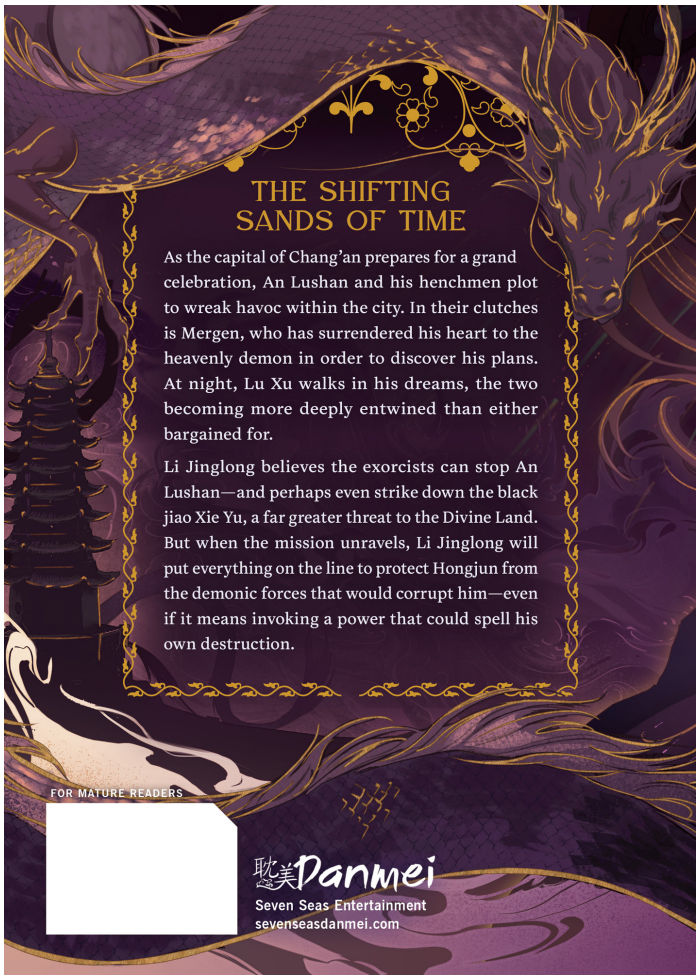
Chapter 136: The Dragons’ Destination

[15] The Yellow Emperor, also known as Xuanyuan, is a mythical hero in Chinese legend. When he attained immortality, he rose to heaven astride a dragon.

Chapter 140: The An Lushan Rebellion

[16] Suffix for a respected elder.

[17] Lines from “Song of Everlasting Regret” by Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi.


THE SHIFTING SANDS OF TIME
As the capital of Chang'an prepares for a grand celebration, An Lushan and his henchmen plot to wreak havoc within the city. In their clutches is Mergen, who has surrendered his heart to the heavenly demon in order to discover his plans. At night, Lu Xu walks in his dreams, the two becoming more deeply entwined than either bargained for.
Li Jinglong believes the exorcists can stop An Lushan—and perhaps even strike down the black jiao Xie Yu, a far greater threat to the Divine Land. But when the mission unravels, Li Jinglong will put everything on the line to protect Hongjun from the demonic forces that would corrupt him—even if it means invoking a power that could spell his own destruction.
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